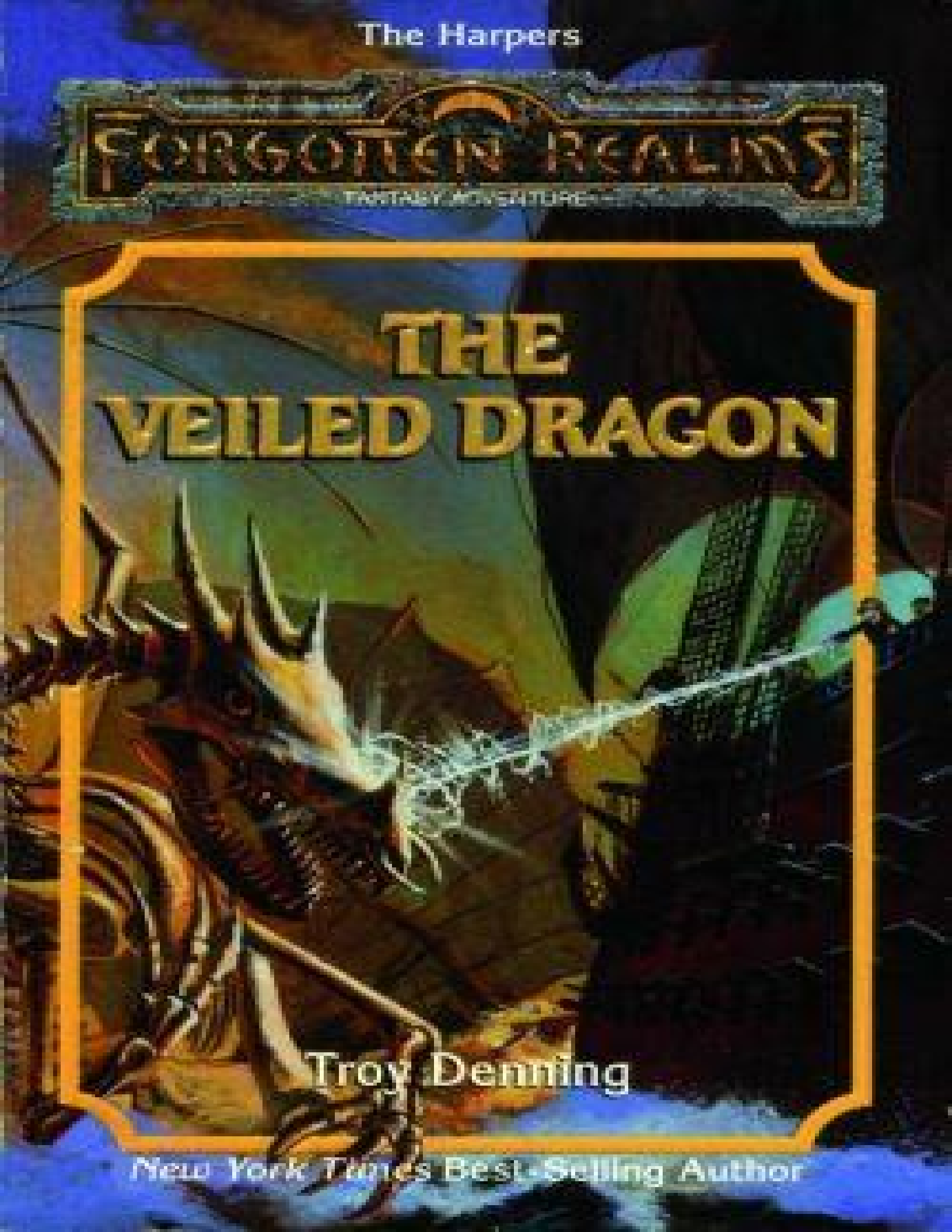
The Harpers

FORGOTTEN REALMS

FANTASY ADVENTURE

THE VEILED DRAGON



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The Harpers, Book Twelve

The Veiled Dragon

Chapter One

Far across the surging dunes of moonlit sea, the dark wyrm wheeled and, with a deftness surer than any desert falcon, struck again at the distant and battered caravel. The serpent caught the topyard in its ebony claws and snapped the thick timbers like twigs; the topsail tore free and away it flew, a gift to the wailing salt winds. From the caravel's distant decks rose a flurry of tiny splinters, arrows and spears hurled by men who looked like insects beneath the belly of the monster. The black shafts struck its thick scales and bounced away without causing harm. The beast swooped low over the stern, spun upon its leathery wing, and returned at once to the vessel. Its talons tore into the wooden hull as the claws of a lion tear into the flanks of a camel.

A great dune of wind-driven sea rose up before Ruha robbing her eyes of the faraway caravel and the nightblack dragon. She locked her arms around the starboard taffrail of her own vessel, a forty-foot cog hired out of Lormyr, and watched the black waters gather like a mountain beside the ship. The dune crashed down, and the froth roared over the wales and swirled about her waist, sweeping her feet from beneath her hips. Ruha hugged the rail as though it were a husband. The torrent raged on, and each second

seemed a minute. The
angry sea dragged at her long aba like a ravisher determined to disrobe her, and
churning tears of foam beat at her face, soaking her veil and her shawl with
cold briny water. Her arms trembled with the strain of holding fast.
At last, the cog heeled to the wind and rose on the heaving sea. The fierce
waters rolled across the deck and poured overboard, carrying with them all the
torrent's rage, and Ruha's smooth-soled sandals found purchase on the wet
planks. She stood and looked toward the distant caravel and saw neither dragon
nor ship, only the splintered tip of a mainmast swaying above the crest of a
faraway dune of water.
Ruha released the taffrail and clambered down the listing deck, half sliding
over the wet planks to where
Captain Fowler stood at the rear of the ship. He was as much ore as human, with
a jutting brow, swinish snout, and tough, grayish-green skin, and he seemed a
strange sort of commander to the eyes of a Bedine witch not long absent from
Anauroch's burning sands. He hugged the tiller with one burly arm, and his gray
eyes never strayed from the ship's single bulging sail.
Ruha grabbed the binnacle, the wooden compass stand before the tiller, and
asked, "Captain Fowler, why do you sail in the wrong direction?" She pointed
over the starboard side. "Do you not see the dragon? Over there!"

"Lady Witch, I know the beast's bearings well enough."
Though his voice was deep and gravelly, the captain spoke with a deliberate composure that belied his feral aspect. "But even I cannot sail Storm Sprite full into the wind. We must beat our way."
Ruha had learned a little of the strange speech used by the men who lived upon the water, enough to know
Fowler meant they had to follow a zigzag course to their goal, and she did not need the captain to explain why.
Even a woman who had not set eyes on a ship until three days ago could see that the Storm Sprite could not sail directly against the wind. But she could also see that
Captain Fowler placed a high value on his vessel, and he was certainly shrewd enough to make a great show of rushing to the caravel's aid while sailing at angles shallow enough to ensure he arrived after the battle was done.
Ruha glanced over the starboard side and saw the caravel topping the moonlit crest of a rolling sea dune. High upon its poop deck sat the dragon, swatting at the faraway vessel's indiscernible crew as a man slaps at stinging flies.
"Captain Fowler, we have no time for this sailing of a snake's path! By the time we reach the ship, we shall find nothing but dead men."
"What would you have me do, Witch?" Fowler demanded. "I cannot change the way the wind blows!"
"And if you could turn the wind, would you have it blow

straight at the
caravel?"
The captain scowled, suspicious. "Aye, but first I would call Umberlee up from
the great depths and have her chain her pet."
"That I cannot do. I know nothing of this Umberlee."
Ruha released the binnacle and cupped her hands together. She blew upon her
fingers and spoke the mystical incantation of a wind enchantment. Her breath
shimmered with a pale sapphire glow, then it swirled in her palms, emitting a
low, keening howl such as starving jackals make at night. From Captain Fowler's
throat arose a gasp of surprise, and his gaze swung from his ship's flaxen sail
to the whistling breeze she held in her grasp.
"Lady Witch, what have you there?"
"It is the wind, Captain Fowler." Twinkling blue streamers spilled from Ruha's
hands and spun across the gloomy deck, each adding its own piercing note to the
wailing of the gale. "I am determined to reach that ship before the dragon sinks
it."
"That I can see, but it is no simple thing to bring a ship like Storm Sprite
around. It takes time."
"The dragon will give you no time!"
Ruha raised her hands toward the distant caravel, which now lay hidden behind
another black and looming water dune.
"Hold your magic, Lady Witch!" commanded the captain. "You may have hired this
ship, but I am the—"
The dune broke over the starboard side, and a torrent of

white foam came boiling
down the deck. Ruha flung her spell at the distant caravel and saw a dazzling
stream of blue-sparkling wind shoot from the side of her own vessel. She threw
her arms around the binnacle, and the dark waters were upon her. The raging
currents swept her feet from beneath her. Had her elbows not been tightly
wrapped around the slippery wood, surely she would have tumbled overboard and
drowned in the angry black sea. Instead, she locked her fingers into the cloth
of her aba and held fast, and when the torrent had receded, she pulled herself
to her feet.
A few yards off the starboard side hung Ruha's spell, a glittering wedge of blue
air that constantly whirled back on itself, yet steadily drove forth into the
fierce night wind. As this wedge moved forward, its fan-shaped tail broadened
and stretched back toward the Storm Sprite, until it engulfed the whole of the
small cog. A fog of cold indigo vapor spread over the decks, causing the crew to
give many shouts of alarm and promise offerings of treasure to Umberlee, and
eddies of sapphire wind sprang to life atop the taffrail. Azure drafts raced
along the wales and undulated through the ratlines, and pale glowing breezes
twined their way up the mast to spread along the yardarms.
Then a magnificent flapping arose in the sail. The night wind spilled from its
belly, pouring a cascade of swirling turquoise zephyrs down

upon the crew, and
the small cog slowed. The sailors wailed in fear, tossing many rings and
earrings overboard to win the favor of their avaricious sea goddess.
"You wretched witch!" Fowler held the tiller at the length of his arm, and his
gray eyes were staring in horror at the pale breeze spiraling along the
lacquered surface. If it troubled the captain to have the scintillating
currents swirling over his green skin also, he showed no sign of it. "What have
you done to my ship?"
"I have done nothing to harm her." Beyond the starboard taffrail, Ruha's wind
spell had stretched to twice the Storm Sprite's length. The glowing breezes had
lost much of their sparkle and swirl, and they were beginning to look like a
flight of spears aimed straight across the churning sea. "Perhaps you should
change course, Captain Fowler. The wind is about to shift."
Fowler glanced at the shining wind spell, then looked at the great water dune
gathering off his ship's starboard side. "I hope you haven't capsized us!"
Ruha met his glower evenly. "And I hope you are done with your stalling, Captain
Fowler."
Fowler's face darkened to stormy purple. He looked forward, and his voice boomed
over the main deck like a thunderclap. "Ready about!"
Terrified though the Storm Sprite's crew might have been, the command sent every
man lurching through the froth to form lines at the braces.

So marvelous was
their skill and balance that not one sailor lost his footing, though the raging
sea would have hurled Ruha overboard in an instant. By the time the last man
had taken his place, the final glimmers of blue light were fading from the
rigging. The wind bent to the witch's magic and swirled around to blow against
the gale. The sail filled from the opposite side, and the Storm Sprite heeled
farther into the dune and began to climb its face. The torrents of water
pouring over her decks grew even greater.
"Loose the braces!" Fowler bellowed.
The crew freed the heavy lines that controlled the angle of the yardarms,
leaving the sail to swing free and flap in the wind. The ship righted itself and
slowed as it had earlier, but the starboard wales finally rose out of the water,
and the sea drained off the decks. The captain gave no further commands and did
not take his eyes from the dune's moonlit crest. Ruha saw his lips moving in
silence, and she wondered whether he was cursing her magic or offering some
bribe to the faithless Queen of the
Sea. The Storm Sprite drifted to a full stop, then heeled away from the heaving
sea. It slipped sideways down the face of the great water dune, and Ruha thought
they would capsize.
"Haul the braces!" Fowler commanded.
The crew hauled on the thick lines that trailed down from the yardarms, bringing

the sail around to catch the wind. The flaxen sheet ceased its flapping, then bulged outward and snapped taut. The sailors grunted, straining to hold the braces steady, and several were pulled off their feet and left to dangle above the deck. The ship rolled back toward the dune, and the dark waters boiled over the decks, flinging strings of men about like beads on a thread. Somehow the crew held the yardarms in position, and the Storm Sprite lurched forward again.

The taffrail rose above the crest of the dune. In the moonlight, Ruha glimpsed the distant caravel, the dragon still standing on the poop deck. The beast had ripped the mizzemnast from its step and was using it like a spear to jab at its foes, almost too tiny to see, upon the main deck. The witch thought it strange that the wyrm fought with a makeshift weapon instead of spraying its enemies with fire or acid, but perhaps the creature feared sinking the vessel and losing its treasure.

The Storm Sprite's bow cleared the top of the dune, and Captain Fowler shoved the tiller to one side. The ship's bow swung neatly over the crest, and the sail sputtered as it lost the wind.

"Fill the sail!"

The command had barely escaped Fowler's lips before the yardarms swung around.

Once more, the sail caught the wind. The Storm Sprite lunged forward and slipped down the back of the dune so swiftly that it reached the

bottom trough before
the captain could give his next command. The prow slammed into the next
rolling dune, and the ship groaned as though her spine would break. A wall of
water roared over the forecastle and rolled down the decks to splash against the
somercastle, then the bow pitched up and the flood drained overboard, carrying
with it two screaming men.
Ruha cried out in alarm. Captain Fowler let out a long breath and fondly patted
the Storm Sprite's tiller.
"That's a fine girl." The half-ore made no remark upon the loss of his crewmen,
but looked forward and, in a calm voice, ordered, "Fasten the braces."
The crew tugged at the brace lines until the last flutter disappeared from the
sail and, with the Storm Sprite rushing madly up the face of the heaving water
dune, secured the lines to the belaying pins. The little cog crested the top and
raced down the other side, then sped, pitching and crashing, toward the distant
caravel. The sailors busied themselves with clearing away the great tangle of
lines scattered over the decks, coiling the loose ends and hanging them in their
proper places, and paid no heed to the misfortune of their two lost fellows.
"Captain Fowler, what of your lost men? Is there nothing you can do for
them?"
The half-ore shrugged and did not look at Ruha. "Even if we could find them, I

would not turn back." His voice was sharp with restrained anger. "They're the
price
Umberlee demanded for letting us come about, and she'd look harshly upon me^f I
tried to bring them back."
Ruha felt a terrible emptiness in her stomach, feeling her spell had brought the
Storm Sprite around too suddenly and caused their loss. "Then I am sorry for
their deaths."
"For their deaths?" Fowler snapped. "And what of
Storm Sprite? She could have lost the rudder or snapped a yardarm!"
"You care more for boards and cloth than for men's lives?"
The captain's jutting brow rose, and his flat nose twitched uncomfortably. He
squared his shoulders and looked forward and did not speak. The crew had
finished the tidying of the lines and now stood in the center of the ship,
clinging to whatever they could find to keep from being swept away by the
cataracts that boiled down the decks each time the bow crashed into another
water dune.
When Fowler finally spoke, his gravelly voice was again deliberate and
composed. "I doubt the world's going to miss those two. They were cutpurses and
murderers both, and if Umberlee doesn't take them for her own, I pity the
shore they wash up on." The captain peered at Ruha from the corner of his narrow
eye, then added, "But I warn you, Storm Sprite is mine. Hiring her does not give

you leave to disregard my commands. While a ship is at sea, the captain is lord
and master, and those who cross him are filthy mutineers. I could sail into Pros
with your rotten carcass hanging from my yardarms, and your friends would not
question your punishment."
Ruha had reason to be glad she still hid her face behind the modest veil other
people, for it would do much to conceal her shock. The Harpers had paid a steep
price for her passage, which, having observed the effect of gold on people in
the Heartlands, she had expected to make her master of the ship. She considered
challenging
Fowler's claim, but saw by his composure and firm manner that he was speaking
the truth. Not for the first time, the witch cursed her ignorance of the strange
customs in this part of the world and wondered if she would ever learn them all.
The Storm Sprite crested another dune, and Ruha saw they had closed half the
distance to the ravaging dragon.
The dark wyrm stood upon the caravel's main deck, facing sternward and digging
through the somercastle like a pangolin after termites. The wings upon its back
were flapping fiercely, knocking aside the cloud of arrows and spears assailing
it from behind. The vessel itself had begun to list, but the bow continued to
slice neatly through the heaving sea, giving Ruha hope that the ship would
survive until they arrived to help. Yet Captain

Fowler had not ordered his men to take up arms. Even with a magic wind driving
his vessel to the rescue, the half-ore still did not mean to give battle.
The Storm Sprite pitched downward, and Ruha lost sight of the battle. "Captain
Fowler, I did not mean to challenge your authority," she said. "I was told that
you are a Harper friend and, despite your mixed blood, a man of honor. I can see
now that my informant was mistaken."
The half-ore's face grew tight. "I have as much honor as any human captain!" he
snapped. "And would I have
Storm Silverhand's name upon my ship if I were not a friend of the Harpers?"
Ruha shrugged. "I know only what my eyes show me—and I can see that you have
not called your men to arms.
You have no intention of aiding that ship."
"You'd do well to worry less about my intentions and think of your assignment.
The Harpers are not given to hiring private ships unless the matter is urgent.
Do you think Lady Silverhand would want you to risk your mission over a fight
that's none of your concern?"
"Storm Silverhand is not here."
The witch's reply was evasive because she did not know the answer to Captain
Fowler's question. Storm Silverhand had told her only that she was to sail to
the port village of Pros, where an important Harper named Vaerana Hawklyn would
be waiting to take her to the city ofElversult. Presumably, Vaerana would

explain Ruha's assignment, but even that was not certain.
Ruha looked toward the distant caravel. "I do know one thing: neither Storm
Silverhand, nor any other
Harper, would turn a blind eye on so many people in such terrible danger. If you
are truly her friend, you know this as well."
The sea was piled high before the Storm Sprite, blocking all sight of the
caravel and its attacker, but Captain
Fowler's gray eyes looked toward the unseen battle and lingered there many
moments.
"It will go better for us, and them, if we arrive after the battle," he said.
"If that dragon sends the Storm Sprite to lie in Umberlee's cold palace, we'll
be of no use to the survivors—or to those waiting in Pros."
Ruha laid a reassuring hand on the half-ore's hairy arm. "Captain Fowler, you
may tell your men to arm themselves. I will not let the dragon sink your ship."
"Lady Witch, sea battles are wild things." The captain's tone was overly
patient, as though he were speaking to a little girl instead of a
desert-hardened witch.
"Even with your magic, you might find you can't keep such a promise."
"Captain Fowler, I have fought more battles than you know. It is true that I
have not won them all, but never have I abandoned someone else out of fear for
myself."
These last words Ruha spoke with particular venom, for she was offended by

Fowler's condescension. "But if you truly value your ship above other men's lives, the Harpers will guarantee my promise. If the dragon sinks the Storm Sprite, we will buy you another."

Fowler's face hardened. "And why are you so keen to fight the drake, Witch? Do you think to redeem yourself for the Voonlar debacle?"

Ruha felt her cheeks redden, and her anger evaporated like water spilled upon the desert floor. "At least I know why you lack faith in me."

The Voonlar debacle had been Ruha's first assignment. Storm Silverhand had sent her to work in a Voonlar tavern, where she was to serve as a secret intermediary and messenger. On her first day, a slave smuggler had crossed her palm with a silver coin. Ruha, failing to understand the significance of the gesture, had accepted the offering with thanks, then balked at delivering the expected services. Feeling slighted, the furious slaver had refused to accept the coin's return and drawn his dagger. He would certainly have killed the witch if one of his own men, a Harper spy, had not leapt to her defense. As it was, she and the spy had been forced to fight their way to safety, leaving the smuggler free to sell a hundred men, women, and children into bondage.

"I am sorry for the misery I caused the slaves of Voonlar. Not a night passes when my nightmares do not ring with their cries." Ruha raised her chin and locked gazes with the half-ore. "But I assure you, my shame

is as nothing
compared to the disgrace of a coward who turns from those he can save."
The half-ore's arm slipped free of the tiller, his lips curling back to show
sharp tusks and yellow fangs, and he stepped toward Ruha. The witch did not back
away, nor did she avoid his eyes, and when there came on the wind a distant roar
and the splintering of ship timbers,
Fowler was the first to glance away.
"Do not fear the dragon," Ruha urged. "My understanding of magic far exceeds
my knowledge of Heartland customs."
Fowler shook his head as though trying to rid himself of some evil thought, and
when he spoke, his voice was as low and guttural as a growl.
"As you wish, then!" He thrust his leathery palm under
Ruha's face. "But give me your pin. I wager this battle will go harder than you
think, and if Umberlee takes offense at your gall, I'll want proof of your
pledge."
Ruha started to object, then thought better and turned away. She reached inside
her aba and removed the
Harper's pin hidden over her heart. It was a small silver brooch fashioned in
the shape of a crescent moon, surrounded by four twinkling stars with a harp
in the center. The pin had once belonged to Lander ofArchenbridge, a valiant
scout who had died helping the Bedine tribes resist an army of rapacious
Zhentarim invaders.
The witch handed the brooch to Fowler. "Guard it well. This

pin was once worn by
my beloved, and I cherish it more than life itself."
"That makes the risk the same for both of us." Fowler pinned the brooch inside
his tunic, then hooked his arm around the tiller and turned his attention to the
main

deck. "Man the harpoons! Break out the axes and spears! Ready yourselves for the attack!"

Every man upon the decks turned an astonished eye toward their captain, and the
crew grumbled its displeasure in one voice. A greasy-haired youth in a thin
cotton tunic and gray, brine-stiffened trousers rushed up the stairs, stopping
at the edge of the half deck.

"Cap'n, sure ye canno' mean to strike that dark thing first?"

"I can and do!" Fowler pulled a key from a chain around his neck and passed it
to the man. "Now, you alley-spawned son of a tavern hag, open the weapon lock
ers before the witch calls the squids to drag us all down to Umberlee!"

The youth's eyes darted toward Ruha. Though the witch did not know who the
squids were or how to summon them, she took some lint from her pocket and
tossed it to the wind, making many strange gestures and reciting her lineage
in the lyrical tongue of the Bedine. The sailor leapt off the

stairs and ducked
into the somercastle. Two of his fellows followed him inside, while several
others struggled forward to the forecastle, fighting their way through the
churning froth that boiled over the bow twice every minute.

The magic wind continued to drive the little cog onward. At intervals, Captain
Fowler adjusted the tiller or ordered the crew to tighten a line, and each time
they crested a dune, Ruha marvelled at how the distance between the Storm Sprite
and her goal had closed. The sailors who had gone into the somercastle returned
with boarding axes and spears for their companions, and those who had struggled
forward to the forecastle also reappeared, laden with thick-braided skeins and
barbed harpoons twice a man's height. They tied lines about their waists and
clambered onto the foredeck, where they pulled the oilskins off three ballistae
and, fighting against raging waters and the ship's mad pitching, set to work
stringing the heavy weapons. By the time they fin-

ished, the caravel lay a hundred yards ahead, lumbering forward at a shallow
angle that would present her starboard side to the Storm Sprite.

The battered caravel stretched to five times the length of the little cog. Her
hull, looming dark and sheer in the night, rose from the sea

like a cliff. The
wales were crowned by a crest of white railing, broken in many places and draped
with shredded rigging. Her foremast, all that remained of three, could have
scraped a cloud, and carried more cloth than three of the Storm Sprite's sails.

Having torn the somercastle completely off the caravel, the dragon now
crouched on the stern of the ship.
All that could be seen of the dark beast were fluttering black wings as large as
sails, an immense ebony flank, and its serpentine tail sweeping back and forth
across the main deck to keep at bay the warriors behind it.

The wyrm raised a black claw above the starboard wale and flung overboard a
handful of refuse. Among the debris were a pilot's table and three screaming
women.
The witch gasped and would have asked if all sea dragons were so large, except
that she feared the question would alarm Captain Fowler. Instead, she watched as
the Storm
Sprite and the caravel continued to crash toward each other. Already, the two
ships were so close that even when the sea heaved up between them, Ruha did not
lose sight of the wyrm's black wings.

At last, Captain Fowler said, "If that wyrm's not the largest ever to fly the
Dragonmere, I'm the Prince of

Elves." The Storm Sprite's bow crashed into the trough between two great sea
dunes, and the water poured over the forecastle and came frothing down the main
deck. "I
hope your magic arrows are powerful ones. A dragon like that could make short
work of us."

Ruha thought it wiser not to mention that, unlike most sorcerers Fowler had
seen, she could not create magic arrows. Heartland wizards used expensive and
exotic ingredients to cast their spells, but desert witches seldom had access to
such components. Instead, they fashioned

their enchantments from the elements that ruled their lives: wind, sun, sand
and stone, and, most preciously, water. Ruha was particularly adept at sand and
sun magic; unfortunately, water was her weakness.

The witch rummaged through her aba until she found a small piece of obsidian.
"My spell will cut through the wyrm as a scimitar cuts through a camel thief."
She displayed the black sliver. "But your men must also be ready, for the
first blow does not always kill."

Fowler glowered at the dark shard suspiciously. "On my command, Witch." He
flashed a menacing scowl that left no doubt about the consequences of

disobeying. "Not a second before."

Ruha inclined her head. "Of course, Captain."

The Storm Sprite pitched upward. The boiling waters crashed against the somercastle and poured over the wales, and the little cog rose on the water dune. Thirty yards off the bow loomed a great wall of dark planks, the hull of the mighty caravel. The witch raised an inquiring eyebrow, but Fowler shook his head.

"Harpoons, let go atop!"

They crested the dune. Ruha cried out in shock, for the caravel lay only twenty yards ahead, with the dragon's mountainous figure still hunched over the stem. A dozen astonished sailors stood at the great ship's wales, staring down at the Storm Sprite.

From the bow of the little cog sounded a trio of sonorous throbs. Three barbed harpoons arced away from the Storm Sprite's ballistae, a long braided rope trailing from each. The first shaft sailed high over the wales of the devastated caravel and passed through one of the wyrm's flapping wings. The other two harpoons dropped lower, piercing the mighty serpent's black scales and sinking to their butts. The dragon gave a furious roar. Its sinuous neck undulated in

rage, and clouds of roiling black fog shot from the caravel's portholes.

The Storm Sprite started down the rolling dune, and the dragon disappeared behind the caravel's looming

hull. Ruha thought surely they would smash into the great ship.

Captain Fowler pushed the tiller to port. The Storm Sprite swung around, though not quickly enough to prevent her bowsprit from splintering on the other vessel.
The little cog completed her turn, then a tremendous boom filled the air when she slammed hulls with the great caravel. The impact hurled Ruha to the deck, and she felt the sliver of obsidian shoot from between her fingers. A terrible rasping arose between the ships as they rubbed hulls, and the witch knew it would not be long before they were past each other.

A powerful hand closed around Ruha's wrist, and she felt herself being dragged toward the tiller. "This is no time to lie about!"

"No, wait!"

Ruha's protest went unheeded, for already Captain Fowler had pulled her to his side and set her on her feet.
Her eyes darted toward the deck. The planks were wet and as dark as the night and, even if the obsidian had not washed overboard already, she would never have

found it in time to attack the dragon.

"Ready, Witch!" Fowler ordered. "It's almost time."

Ruha looked forward, raising her eyes toward the wyrm. She found her view
blocked by the huge flaxen square of the Storm Sprite's half-filled sail.
Beneath the sheet's fluttering edge, she could see harpoon lines playing out,
and also the cog's bow slipping past the caravel's massive rudder. The witch
thrust her hand into her aba and found several small pebbles.

Fowler hauled on the tiller, bringing his ship smartly around the stern of the
caravel. The flaxen sail filled with wind and, like a proud stallion spurred to
the gallop, the Storm Sprite leapt forward. The harpoon lines snapped taut,
and a tremendous shudder ran through the cog.

Fowler flashed his tusks. "Now, Lady Witch! Slice that terror out of the sky!"

Ruha pulled the pebbles from her pocket and pivoted around to keep her gaze
fixed on the looming caravel.
Over the stern came a great mass of writhing darkness, the wyrm being dragged
along by the sturdy harpoon lines. The dragon beat the air with its wings,
struggling in vain to right itself and wheel on Its attacker. Its

wings were
tattered and strewn with holes, while its dark scales looked strangely tarnished
and dull. Even the serpent's tail ended in a long section of gray, weathered
bone, as though it were suffering from some wasting disease or festering
wound.

Bracing herself against the binnacle, Ruha rolled her pebbles between her palms
and called upon her stone magic. The rocks began to buzz and shake, vibrating so
violently that it hurt her bones to hold them. She tossed the stones up before
her face, and there they hung, sputtering and whirling around each other like
angry wasps.

Recovering from its initial shock, the dragon ceased its flailing and stopped
trying to wheel on its attacker. It beat its wings more slowly and contented
itself with staying aloft.

"I said now, Witch!"

Fowler's eyes were locked on the dragon, and Ruha knew what concerned him.
Smaller wyrms than this could spew fire and acid twice the length of the Storm
Sprite's harpoon lines, and the witch had no illusions about what would happen
if such a spray caught the little cog. The serpent's neck began to curl toward
the

Storm Sprite.

"Wait no longer!" Fowler pleaded.

At last, a faint sapphire gleam appeared inside the pebbles. Ruha blew upon the swirling stones, at the same time breathing the incantation of a wind spell. They sizzled away, screeching like banshees and trailing a ribbon of blue braided light. The dragon had almost brought its head around when the pebbles tore through its wing and blasted its flank, spraying shards of shattered scales in every direction. The wyrm stiffened and dropped

toward the water, but when its belly touched the heaving sea dunes, it roared and once again lifted itself into the air.

Fowler's face paled from green to yellow. "I was a fool to listen to you, Witch! To think a woman who'd take a slaver's coin could know dragons—"

"Captain Fowler, wait." Ruha wrapped an arm around the binnacle, then pointed at the wyrm. "The spell has only begun its work."

The half-ore narrowed his eyes and turned back to the dragon, still being dragged along by the harpoon lines. The wyrm had curled into the shape of a horseshoe, with

both its head and tail
pointing away from the Storm
Sprite. Its wings were fluttering so slowly and sporadically they could barely
keep it aloft, while its serpentine body shuddered with erratic convulsions.

"My pebbles have not stopped moving," Ruha explained. "They are flying about
within the wyrm, tearing it apart from the inside."

"A quick kill would've been better," Fowler grunted.

The captain kept his gaze fixed on the dragon, as though he would not be
satisfied until the thing dropped into the sea and sank out of sight. Behind the
serpent, the battered caravel was lumbering away, rolling wildly from
side-to-side as her crew struggled to bring her under control. Atop the stern,
Ruha saw twenty men standing amidst the wreckage, some holding lanterns while
the rest waved amulets and talismans at the Storm

Sprite.

"That seems a strange custom. Captain Fowler." Ruha pointed at the men on the caravel's stern. "What does it mean?"

Fowler shrugged, barely glancing at the display. "Who can tell? She's a foreign
ship. They're probably telling us to mind our own business."

A tarnished scale fluttered off the dragon's back, followed by

the spiraling
blue streak of a pebble. Ruha watched closely for more such flashes, as they
indicated

the tiny rocks had demolished the internal organs and were beginning to find
their way out of the body. A second stone shot from the wyrm, then a third and
a fourth, and still the serpent trembled and convulsed but somehow kept from
falling into the sea.

Ruha scowled. Most victims were dead by the time four stones left their bodies.

Captain Fowler must have seen her brow furrow. "How long's it going to take that
wyrm to die?"

"It is a big dragon. Captain."

Another pebble escaped the serpent's body and sphraled away into the heavens,
and Fowler cast an impatient glance toward the departing caravel.

"I'd like to catch her if we can," he said. "A prize like that… If her captain's
a good man, he'll reward us well."

"Captain Fowler, what is this obsession of yours?"
Ruha demanded. "Do you expect treasure for—"

Ruha's question was interrupted when the dragon finally

went limp and plummeted into the water, raising such a splash that buckets of dark sea rained down upon the Storm Sprite. The harpoon lines throbbed sharply, and the cog nosed into the water and heeled toward the wyrm. Fowler shoved the tiller to port, bringing his ship around so sharply she seemed to pivot on her bow.

"Loose the braces!" he boomed. He turned to Ruha and, more quietly, asked, "If you'd be kind enough to call off your wind. Lady Witch."

Ruha uttered a single syllable, and the magic breeze died away. The crew loosed the brace lines, leaving the yardarms to swing free, and the sail snapped and popped as it flapped loose in the wind. The drag of the wyrm's enormous body quickly brought the Storm Sprite to a halt. She swung around and began to roll wildly in the churning sea, still pitching toward the bow and listing toward the wyrm.

All at once, the crew broke into a tremendous cheer, many of them calling Umberlee's favor upon the witch's head. A great swell of pride filled Ruha's breast, and for

the first time since the debacle in Voonlar, she felt worthy to wear the pin of a Harper.

A loud, sonorous gurgle sounded just off the starboard side.

Ruha looked over to see the dragon's corpse sliding beneath the churning black waters. The Storm Sprite gave a long groan and listed even farther to starboard, the harpoon lines swinging toward her hull. Several of the crew lost their footing and would have fallen overboard had it not been for the quick hands of their comrades.

Ruha looked to Captain Fowler. "Why is the wyrm sinking? Shouldn't it float?"

"Aye, it should." A larcenous gleam filled the half-ore's eyes, and he glanced toward the bobbing lanterns atop the stern of the departing caravel. "Unless its belly is filled with foreign gold!"

The Storm Sprite continued to heel, and Ruha shook her head emphatically. "No, Captain Fowler! Cut it free, or you'll sink us!"

"Cut it free?" the half-ore scoffed. "My crew would mutiny!"

"They would prefer losing the treasure to dying, I am sure."

"Don't be," Fowler said. "It takes a lot of gold to sink a dragon. And there's the bounty to think of, too. Cormyr pays a thousand gold for each wyrm head brought to port, and every man gets his share."

"All the gold in the Heartlands will not buy their lives back."

"Aye, but men sell themselves for less every day."

Fowler lifted his chin toward the crew. "If you think they'll forgo their chance to live like kings, you know less about men than you do about the Heartlands."

Ruha studied the men. As Fowler had claimed, their expressions were more greedy than fearful, and despite the Storm Sprite's increasing list, not a single sailor was moving to cut the wyrm free. The cog continued to tip farther, until at last the harpoon lines ran vertically from the wales into the water. The heaving sea dunes crashed

over the bow with thunderous force, and the decks sloped so steeply that it was impossible to stand without holding a halyard or shroud. Still, the crew made no move to free the ship.

"What's all this standing about?" Fowler yelled. "Secure the lines to the anchor windlass and prepare to haul!"

An excited murmur filled the air as the crew leapt to the task with surprising agility, dangling monkeylike from lines and belaying pins. The sea continued to batter the Storm Sprite, spraying white foam over the decks and threatening to capsize her all too often, but it took only a few moments for the men to wrap the lines around the windlass and start winching. Their efficiency did little to

soothe Ruha's nerves. In the desert only fools tempted fate, especially for a prize as petty as gold.

"What of your reward, Captain Fowler?" The witch glanced toward the departing caravel. The lanterns atop its stern were still visible whenever the great ship crested a dune, but the gray outlines of the vessel itself were rapidly fading into the night. "I thought you wanted to catch the caravel?"

Fowler did not even look over his shoulder. "Not if the dragon pilfered all its gold."

Several wails of surprise sounded from the windlass; then the Storm Sprite righted herself so suddenly that half a dozen men fell flat on the deck.

"What happened?" Fowler boomed. "Why are those lines slack?"

"It—it just happened," came the reply. "The harpoons must have pulled free!"

A chorus of disappointed groans rumbled through the crew, but Fowler's gray eyes shined with alarm. "All of them at once? Never."

The sailors looked at each other with baffled expressions, as though they expected one of their number to confess to some mistake that explained the mystery. A

babble sounded ahead of the Storm Sprite and to both

sides of her bow. The little cog fell abruptly silent, and every head aboard
swiveled toward the noises.

Ruha slipped a hand into her aba. "Perhaps the men should retrieve their
weapons, Captain—"

A curtain of black wings rose from the sea ahead, eclipsing the moon's
reflection on the water and casting a shroud of murky darkness over the ship.
The crew gasped in alarm and retreated toward the somercastle, giving no
apparent thought to the spears and axes that lay stowed around the deck.

"What's the matter?" Fowler demanded. As he spoke, a pair of ebony talons shot
from the water on both sides of the bow. There was no hide over the gnarled
fingers, and even the wrists exhibited bare patches of gray, weathered bone. The
claws dug into the wales, and the little cog's bow dipped into the sea. The
half-ore released the tiller and stepped forward. "Cowards! Stand and fight!"

For the first time since Ruha had boarded, the captain's words seemed to have
no effect on his crew. The bravest of them watched over their shoulders as they
opened a hatch or door, but most simply screamed in terror and hurled

themselves through the nearest opening.
Their panic surprised the witch, for until now they had exhibited the unwavering
discipline of men who knew their lives depended upon working together. She
pulled a small crystal of quartz from her pocket, at the same time catching
Fowler's arm with her free hand.

"Your men are braver than this," she said. "It is only the dragon's magic
frightening them."

"Only?" the half-ore scoffed. "It will be enough to sink us!"

Ruha pointed her crystal over the ship's bow. "I am not frightened."

The dragon's head rose into view and, despite her claim, the witch was so
shocked she could not keep the syllables other incantation from fleeing her
mind. She found herself staring not into the slit pupils of a wyrm's diabolic
eyes, but into the vastly more sinister void of two

black, empty sockets. Though a thin layer of shriveled black scales still
clung to the beast's brow and cheeks, its snout was a fleshless blade of cracked
bone and cavernous nostrils. Even the creature's curved horns, once as sturdy
and long as horse lances, were mere splintered stumps of their ancient
magnificence.

"Umberlee have mercy!" Fowler ripped a golden ring from his ear and hurled it
overboard, a piece of bloody lobe still dangling from the clasp. "Save us!"

The dragon's empty-eyed gaze followed the arc of the glimmering earring as it
plunged into the sea, then snapped back to Fowler.

"If you wish mercy, do not throw your gold to Umberlee." The dragon spoke in a
voice as raspy as it was loud, and the mere sound of it made Ruha's legs shake
so that she could hardly keep her feet. "Give it to me, and perhaps your death
shall be quick!"

When Fowler made no move to produce more gold, the dragon opened its jaws,
revealing a hundred broken fangs and a scabrous white tongue, and the Storm
Sprite^s sail billowed toward its mouth. A loud rasp rustled down the length of
the ship, and Ruha realized the serpent was gorging itself with air. She
squeezed the quartz crystal between her thumb and forefinger, at the same time
summoning her spell back to mind.

The rasping ceased, and wisps of dark fog rose from the dragon's nostrils. Ruha
called out the words of a wind spell. The quartz crystal evaporated in a searing
flash, and a bolt of white lightning leapt from her hand. It struck the wyrm's

head with a thunderous bang, hurling desiccated scales and shards of gray bone
high into the air. The creature's neck snapped back, and from its shattered
maw shot a plume of boiling, turbid vapor.

The dragon roared in pain, shaking the Storm Sprite from stem to stem, and the
sea sputtered with the sound of its torn flesh dropping into the water, but the
beast did not slip beneath the surging dunes. Instead, it dug its ebony talons
deep into the ship's wales, then laid its neck

over the bow to display the smoking, mangled crater that had once been its
face.

"Who would do this to me?" the dragon rumbled. "Cast yourself to Umberlee, or
you shall wish you had."

Captain Fowler glanced back at Ruha. His lips were as white as the moon. "Well,
Harper, c-can you k-keep your promise?"

Ruha thrust her shaking hands into her aba and, fearing her efforts would come
to naught, fumbled through her pockets. Live wyrms could be killed, but what
could she—or anyone—do against this dead beast?

The turbid vapor that had spilled from the dragon's maw earlier began to settle
over the front part of the ship. As soon as the dark fog touched the rigging,

lines started to snap and fall, hissing and smoking as though they were on fire.
The sail broke free of the yardarms and fluttered to the deck, as sheer and full
of holes as old lace. The mast, and then all the wood from midships forward,
began to sizzle and fume.

Fowler sank to his knees. "Wretched witch! What have you done to my ship?"

The dragon turned its shattered face toward the captain. "Did she give the
order to interfere with me? Or was it you, thinking of Cormyr's filthy bounty?"

With that, the wyrm withdrew its head and slipped beneath the sea's dark
surface. Ruha stepped to the taffrail and saw the shadow of one huge wing
gliding through the water toward her.

"Captain, did I not promise that the Harpers would buy you another ship?" She
stepped toward the half-ore.
"How can they do that if we perish with this one?"

Fowler looked at Ruha with disbelieving eyes. "You think we've a choice in the
matter? If you could destroy the dragon, you'd have done it by now."

The yardarms broke free and crashed down upon the deck. The thick planks gave
way as though they had been rotting for a hundred years, and the spars struck

several barrels stowed below decks. One of the casks split in two,

spilling a viscous liquid that filled the air with a bitter, caustic stench.
The babble of swirling water sounded behind the Storm Sprite.

Without glancing back, Ruha pointed into the hold
"What is in those casks?"

The half-ore looked puzzled, as though he found it a strange time for Ruha to
question the cargo. "Lamp oil
We've got to have ballast, and it might as well pay—"

A sharp crack sounded from the rear of the deck. Ruha glimpsed the tiller
disappearing through its housing, then three black talons rose into sight and
hooked themselves over the taffrail. The witch grabbed Fowler's arm and jerked
him off the poop deck, pushing him toward a boarding axe down on the main deck.

"I cannot save your ship, Captain, but I can save us.
Go and smash those oil casks."

The half-ore jumped down and retrieved the weapon, then leapt into the hold.
Ruha ducked down beside the somercastle and emptied her pockets of all the
brimstoni powder she possessed, piling it upon the deck before her
A sharp crack sounded from the stern of the ship, thei the

Storm Sprite pitched
to her rear. The witch shape< the heap of yellow powder into the figure of a
tiny bird and uttered a wind spell.

The brimstone vanished in a brief flash of yellow, and in its place appeared the
diaphanous form of a yellow canary. Ruha pointed toward the ship's hold, where
Captain Fowler was busy smashing oil casks, and made a quick sweeping motion.
The little bird flitted off to circle the area she had indicated.

A tremendous crackling sounded from the poop deck, and Ruha peered over the edge
to see the dragon's claws ripping into the stern of the ship. She withdrew
another quartz crystal from her aba, then jumped onto the ladder and pointed it
at the creature's pulverized face, yelling a series of nonsensical syllables
that she hoped the beast would mistake for those she had used to cast her first
lightning bolt.

The dragon's head swiveled toward Ruha. She felt oilladen air swirling past
her head and heard the unmistakable rasp of the creature filling its chest.
The beast sucked the diaphanous yellow bird she had created earlier into its
throat. The witch dropped behind the somercastle, squeezing the quartz crystal
and uttering the incantation of a fire spell.

A fiery spark shot from the tip of the crystal, igniting the stream of air being
sucked into the dragon's throat.
Ruha threw herself through the somercastle door. She felt a jolting crash; then
there was a searing fulguration, the smell of wood ash, and finally the cool
bite of saltwater.

Two

Once the numb ringing inside
Ruha's skull abated and it occurred to her that she was still alive, her first
thought was not that she would choke on the saltwater she had swallowed, nor
that the weight of her sodden aba would drag her beneath the dark waters, nor
even that she might bleed to death from her many lacerations. When the witch
opened her eyes and saw the sea heaving all around her, her first thought was
that she would never be found.

The dunes loomed as high as mountains, with rolling, moonlit faces that blocked
Ruha's sight in every direction, making her feel immeasurably alone and
insignificant in the stormy vastness of the Dragonmere. They were maddeningly
inconstant, now lifting her toward the stars, now dropping her into the abyssal
gloom, now carrying her along on steep, tumbling slopes of

water. The witch
knew she could not let the sea have its way with her. She had to free herself of
its capricious grasp or die, but her chest was pumping water from her lungs in
racking coughs, and she could barely keep her head above the surface, much
less hold herself steady on the crest of a surging dune long enough to… do what,
Ruha did not know.

In all likelihood, she was not the only one to survive the disintegration of the
Storm Sprite, but there had

been no time to put the little shore boat into the water.
The others would be in the same predicament as Ruha, and no doubt anxious to
blame her for their troubles.

The caravel crew would have every reason to treat the witch more
kindly—providing they came back. Certainly, they had witnessed the explosion
that destroyed the dragon, but would they realize what had happened to the Storm
Sprite? Was their captain an honest man who would turn back to help those who
had helped him?
Ruha could only allow herself to believe that the answer to both questions was
yes; to assume anything else was to lose hope, and to lose hope in Umberlee's
domain was to die.

Still, the caravel would not arrive soon. It would take time for

the great
vessel to come around, then she would have to beat her way against the
wind—using only one of the three masts she had once carried, and probably rely
ing upon a tiller half splintered by the dragon attack. By the time she arrived,
the Storm Sprite's wreckage would be strewn across a square mile of heaving sea,
and Ruha knew better than to think any lookout would spy her dark head bobbing
amongst all the oil casks, splintered timbers, and shreds of dragon floating
upon the surging waters.

A large, curved timber appeared atop a nearby dune, its end briefly jutting over
the crest like a great scimitar.
Ruha fixed her eye on the beam. As it glided down the watery slope, she started
to swim, reaching forward and kicking her legs in the fashion Storm Silverhand
had taught her. The witch's shawl and veil had vanished, but her aba remained
securely wrapped about her shoulders, and she had to struggle against both its
clumsy cut and sodden weight to make headway. Nevertheless, she did not even
consider slipping out of the garment. Its pockets were loaded with exotic dirts
and rocks useful for her stone magic. More importantly, all of her spells were
sewn into the interior lining. In the desert, paper and ink were precious
commodities, but there was always plenty

of thread to spare for embroidery.

By the time Ruha reached the timber, she could do no more than throw her arms over the top and hang there gasping. Though she had not realized it until the exercise had warmed her body, the water was deceptively cool.
Her joints began to stiffen, and she recalled Fowler's stories of pulling his sailors aboard, blue and dead after only minutes in the water. But that had been in northern seas, and the Dragonmere was in the south. The temperature here could not be so dangerous—or so the witch hoped.

Ruha fought back her growing panic, reminding herself that the sea was not so different from the desert: it was vast and empty and lonely, with most of the life lying hidden beneath the surface. True, the dunes moved faster and they were made of water, but not water that one could drink. That was as precious here as it was in the sandy wastes. And there was one other similarity, one the witch did not want to consider: the sea, like Anauroch, was hospitable to those who knew its ways—and merciless to those who did not.

Ruha contemplated her growing chill and decided it probably would not kill her.
She was not shivering, she still felt her toes and fingers, and her teeth were

not chattering. All in all, the witch had spent more frigid nights in the
desert, and she suspected that the cool water was keeping her from bleeding to
death. There were dozens of cuts on her body, some both long and deep, but all
stinging bitterly from the salt. The witch could feel her blood swirling about
her, warm and viscous against her skin, but she could not tell how much she had
lost. Had she been on dry land, she would have examined her cuts and bandaged
them all, starting with the worst one first. But in the dark, heaving sea, she
had to content herself with running her fingers over each wound in turn, feeling
for a heavy flow that suggested a severed vein or artery.

Ruha found no rushing streams or pulsing tides, but

she could count her inspection only a partial success. The swirling saltwater
made it difficult to distinguish an oozing flow from a gushing one. In the
end, she decided the mere fact that she did not feel light-headed was proof
enough that she was not bleeding to death. And she thought of at least one good
thing about being adrift: in the desert, some hungry jackal or lion would smell
her blood and come running, but such a thing could not happen at sea. No
creature she knew could follow a scent through water.

Having convinced herself she would not be dead by the time the caravel returned,

Ruha turned her thoughts to making certain she would be found. Her own people, the Bedine, used large, curled horns called amarats for such purposes. The witch did not have an amarat, since only the men were allowed to use them, but she did have wind magic.

Ruha drew a deep breath. Then, speaking from her belly, she uttered a wind spell. Within her chest, she felt a tremendous sensation of expansion, as though her torso were growing as large and round as an oil cask. She tipped her chin back and cupped a hand around her mouth.

"I am here!" The voice that came from her lips sounded like that of a giant, deep and resonant. It was so loud that it made the water reverberate like a drum. "Come and help me!"

Ruha pulled her hand away from her mouth and silently counted to a hundred, then repeated the message. As before, her voice was that of a giant. The witch counted again, then fell into a regular pattern of silence and calling. She was always careful to keep constant both the strength of her voice and the duration between her cries, hoping that would help the caravel captain determine whether he was moving closer to her, or farther away.

Ten calls later, Ruha's cries became thunderous croaks, for

her throat had begun
to ache from the sheer power of

her booming voice. Nevertheless, she continued to shout, determined not to
vary her routine until her windpipes burst—though she was starting to fear the
cold would kill her first. Goose bumps were rising all over her body, and she
felt a cold numbness creeping into the marrow of her bones. To make matters
worse, the flotsam from the
Storm Sprite was drifting apart faster than she had expected. She could see
nothing close by except a handful of splintered deck planks, an oil cask riding
low in the water, and several slabs of rotten dragon flesh.

As Ruha watched, one of the scaly chunks vanished beneath the sea. The slab did
not slip gently under the surface, as though the meat had become too waterlogged
to float. It plunged downward with a sharp swish, leaving nothing on the
surface except a small circle of swirling water.

Ruha was not entirely puzzled. She had seen fish take insects swimming on the
surface of oasis ponds, but the slab of dragon meat had been as large as her
head. The witch could not even imagine the fish big enough to swallow such a
morsel. She thought other bloody legs dangling in the water and wished for a
larger piece of timber—one onto which she could crawl entirely. Ruha pulled

herjambiya from its sheath and prayed it would not slip from her grasp. The
long, curved dagger was not particularly valuable, but it had once belonged to a
man to whom she had been married for two days. He had died fighting a band of
brutal invaders, and thejambiya was all she had to remember him by.

The time to call came again. "Please hurry! Something is under the water!"

Ruha forced herself not to think about her dangling legs and tried to study the
sea around her, watching to see if the dragon meat continued to disappear. The
task was an impossible one, for no sooner would she glimpse a slab than a dune
would heave up in front of her. When the water subsided, the scaly chunk was as
likely as not to be gone. The witch never glimpsed any telltale circles

to indicate the morsel had been taken by a fish, but she knew better than to
assume she would in such dark, rough water.

Ruha felt herself rise on a dune, then something bumped into her knee and rubbed
past her thigh. Her scream filled the sky with a cry that boomed like thunder.
She thrust herjambiya into the water and sliced into a sinuous body, her
knuckles brushing along a gritty hide. A huge tail fin slapped her arm, and the
creature flitted away.

The witch let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. It had only
been a fish—one as large as a man, but a fish nonetheless—and apparently it
intended her no harm.

A distant voice came to her on the wind. "Keep yelling,
Witch! Do you think I can see you in this murk?"

Ruha glanced toward the voice and saw the blocky silhouette of a small,
makeshift raft cresting the next dune.
On top of it kneeled two figures, both digging into the water with short
sections of deck planking. One of the men appeared rather lanky and gaunt, but
the other was stocky and stout, with the jutting brow and swinish snout of a
half-ore.

Ruha slipped from the crest of her dune and lost sight other rescuers. "I am
here, Captain Fowler! One dune ahead!"

"What was… booming about?" Now that the sea had risen between Ruha and Fowler,
the wind rendered his voice almost inaudible. "Are… hurt?"

"I am well. Something bumped my leg, but it was only a fish."

Fowler's voice remained silent for a brief moment, then suddenly rose above all
the other sounds: "… yourself!
That fish could be a…"

Ruha scowled and tried to pull herself farther onto the beam, but it only twisted and dumped her back into the sea. She tried again, kicking her feet to help lift her weight out of the water. Something slammed into the

thick part of her leg. Her arms slipped free of the wet wood, and she felt herself spin and glide away from the timber. She heard a peal of thunder and realized it was her own wail of agony, magnified a thousand times by the magic of her wind spell. A keen, crushing ache erupted in her thigh and raced through the rest of her body, and finally she noticed the teeth. They were clamped around the thick part of her leg, driven deep into her flesh.

Ruha thrust her free hand into the water and caught hold of a gritty dorsal fin. The fish began to work its jaw back and forth, scraping the points of its serrated teeth across her thigh bone. She pulled herself toward its tail and plunged herjambiya into its flank, then dragged the curved blade back toward herself. A torrerrtTofcool, greasy blood gushed from the wound, covering her hand.

The fish dove, dragging Ruha into the black stillness beneath the sea. She could not see its lashing body, but it seemed to be the same

creature that had bumped
her earlier, about six feet long, with a slender, lashing body and a plethora of
long, pointed fins. She twisted herjambiya in the wound and pushed it toward
the creature's underside, praying she would find something that resembled a
throat.

The blade struck bone, and the jaws other attacker closed more tightly,
threatening to crush her thigh. The fish whipped its head from side-to-side.
Ruha's flesh tore, and her lungs burned with the need for fresh air. She thrust
Yierjambiya into the side of the beast's head and slashed through something
soft. She felt a rush of frothy water, but the creature seemed to feel no pain.
It whipped its body around and went deeper, jerking her after it. A
sharp crack reverberated up her spine, followed by a brutal, stabbing pang
that seemed to spring from her bone marrow itself. The witch opened her
mouth—she could not stop herself—and screamed.

A deafening roar throbbed through the water, striking
Ruha's eardrums with such force that it seemed her entire skull had shattered.
Without realizing she had

raised them, the witch found her hands clamped over her pulsing ears, the hilt
other dead husband's jambiya pressed against her temple. The sound had a much

greater effect on the fish. The creature's body went slack, its jaws opened, and
it began to squirm about drunkenly, nearly tangling itself in her aba before it
scraped its gritty tail across her cheek and vanished into the black waters.

Ruha had a fierce urge to cough and realized that her body had been trying to
fill its air-starved lungs with seawater. She clamped her jaws shut and kicked
toward the surface—then nearly forgot herself and screamed again when a sharp
jolt of pain shot through her thigh bone.
Continuing to kick with her good leg, the witch lowered a hand and found a
mangled circle of flesh just below her left hip. The water felt alarmingly warm,
and she could feel a steady current of blood flowing from the wound.

When Ruha's head finally broke the surface, her ears were still ringing from her
underwater scream. She could not hear the wind wailing, but she did feel its
cool touch upon her skin and immediately started to gasp and cough, causing such
a roar with her booming voice that she felt it in her feet. Already, she was
growing dizzy from blood loss, and she feared she would die before her coughing
spasm ended.

Ruha slipped her jambiya into its sheath and set about unbuckling her belt. As
simple as the task was, she could hardly accomplish it. With

only one leg able
to move and both hands required to undo the clasp, she could barely tread water.
Her sodden aba kept dragging her beneath the surface, and she feared that if she
allowed herself to sink too far, she would not have the strength to swim back to
the surface.

From behind Ruha came the muffled, distant-sounding murmur of a man's voice. She
spun herself around and, less than twenty yards away, saw a ragged section of
hull planks lashed to three, low-floating oil casks. Atop the makeshift raft
stood Captain Fowler and the other man,

both shouting at the witch and waving her toward the raft.

"I am unable to swim!" Ruha's voice roared like a falling wall inside her own
head, and both Fowler and his crewman cringed at its volume. "A fish attacked
me. My leg is—"

Ruha's explanation ended in a strangled cry of alarm as a huge, gritty snout
bumped into her back. The witch took three deep breaths while the body of the
great fish brushed along her flank, its dorsal fin harrowing the water like a
ship's prow. At last, the creature passed, drawing a sharp hiss when its massive
tail slapped the witch's mangled leg.

Ruha stopped fussing with her belt and filled her lungs, at the same time glancing in Captain Fowler's direction. The half-ore's eyes were bulging out of their sockets, and he was frantically tying a rope around the waist of his trembling companion.

A mountainous dune rose beside Ruha, and she saw the dark line of a dorsal fin emerging from its face. She closed her eyes and buried her head in the water, at the same time voicing the mightiest, deepest bellow her aching throat could manage. Again, the water throbbed, hammering her eardrums with a terrible, pulsing ache.

Before the witch could pull her head from the water, the enormous fish hit her—but she did not feel its long teeth tearing through her torso. Instead, the beast's nose slipped beneath her hips, and she slid along its spine until the creature started to roll toward her. With one hand, the witch caught its dorsal fin and pushed away, narrowly escaping being forced beneath the surface. The monster floated belly up for a moment, then slowly writhed down into the sea.

The snout of a smaller fish nosed Ruha's shoulder; then she felt the rough skin of yet another creature rasping across her foot. "There are more?" she shrieked. "By Afar, I hate this sea!"

Over the roaring of the dunes came the alarmed mur-

mur of Captain Fowler's voice, so muted by the ringing in Ruha's ears that she could not understand what he was saying. She looked up and saw him only ten yards away, pointing in the direction in which the monstrous fish had vanished a moment earlier. Beside him stood the sailor with the rope tied around his waist, staring into the dark waters and stubbornly shaking his head.

The witch filled her lungs with air and spun around to see a huge black fin slicing toward her, albeit on a somewhat crooked course. She pushed her head beneath the water and, summoning her voice from deep down in her bowels, bellowed. Again, the sea pulsed with her fear and anger, and again the great fish rolled on its back.

Ruha turned toward her rescuers and saw six more of the beasts floating with their bellies toward the sky. They all had wedge-shaped snouts and small, pitiless black eyes and shovel-shaped mouths. She began to pull herself through the surging waters. Her head was spinning from the loss of blood, and she did not know how she would find the strength to reach the raft before the monsters recovered and swarmed her again.

The witch had taken no more than three strokes before Captain Fowler grabbed the reluctant sailor by his collar and belt, and pitched him into the sea. The man splashed down two yards away. Ruha expected the fellow to turn away and swim for the raft, but instead he cast an angry glance in her direction and thrust out his hand. She stretched forward and caught his wrist, digging her fingernails deep into the flesh of his forearm. The sailor scowled, but rolled onto his back and started to kick his legs. Captain Fowler hauled on the rope, pulling them back toward the raft.

Ruha looked over her shoulder and saw the stunned fish already beginning to twitch and squirm. She wrapped her hand into the short length of rope holding up the sailor's dingy trousers.

"Cover your ears!" The man cringed at the sound of Ruha's booming voice. "And keep kicking!"

After the sailor put his hands to his ears, the witch pushed her face beneath the surface and let out another bellow. The concussion once more stunned the small fish into inaction, but the monster was too far away. Its fins continued to flutter, and its immense body slowly rolled in the water.

Ruha felt Fowler's thick hand in her hair. He twisted his

fingers into her
unbound tresses and lifted her out of the water. It was a painful way to be
hauled from the sea, but the witch did not complain. She grabbed a lashing and
scrambled completely aboard, hissing in pain as she dragged her savaged leg
across the wet planks. She rolled onto her back and saw the sailor clutching the
edge of the raft, struggling in vain to pull himself aboard.
Behind him, the huge fish had righted itself and was already swinging its snout
toward the raft.

"By the burning face ofAt'ar!" Ruha snarled, swearing her oath in the name of
the fiery Bedine sun goddess. She thrust her hand into her aba and rummaged
through its blood-soaked pockets. "That monster has troubled me enough!"

The sailor looked back toward the great fish. The creature was half-submerged,
snaking a slow, crooked path toward the raft. Captain Fowler reached past Ruha
to grab the man's shoulder, but the fellow shook his head and swam away. At
first, the witch did not understand what he was doing; after his initial
reluctance to help her, he hardly seemed the type to draw a sea-monster away
from his companions. Then, when the beast did not change course, she noticed the
slippery red ribbon she had left on the raft planks. Perhaps lions and jackals
could not follow blood trails through water, but they did not

breathe the stuff.

Fish did.

Ruha withdrew two small packets from her pocket, one filled with sand, the other with lime. She poured the contents of both packages into her palm and spit on them.
As the witch mixed them together, Captain Fowler took a

boarding axe from his belt and stepped forward to meet the advancing fish. She grabbed the half-ore's leg and pulled him roughly back.

"This fish belongs to me. Captain." Though Ruha was trying to speak quietly, Fowler flinched and instinctively retreated from her thunderous voice. She drew him to her side. "Help me stand."

The captain glanced at the approaching monster, which had now submerged almost completely. Only the tip of its dorsal fin still showed, slicing across the face of a heaving dune. Fowler slipped a hand under Ruha's arm and pulled her up.

The dorsal fin was only five yards away when the rising dune swallowed it.
With Fowler's help, Ruha retreated to the back of the raft. A dull buzz started to drone in her ears, and swirls of dark fog swam along the edges of her vision.
The witch had lost too much blood to be standing. Her knees buckled, and, had it

not been for the captain's support, she would have fallen.

As Ruha struggled to call her spell to mind, a huge gray snout burst from the water and crashed down on the corner of the raft. A pair of tiny, wide-set eyes flared briefly; then the monster squirmed forward. The raft listed toward the trough of the dune, and the witch feared they would flip over. Her vision narrowed to a black tunnel. She reached out and slapped the fish on the nose, smearing the sand mixture over its rough hide.

The fish twisted sideways, temporarily preventing the raft from tipping farther, and opened its mouth. The beast's teeth were as large and ugly as spearheads, and Ruha knew they would tear her into bite-size pieces with a single snap. She uttered the incantation of a stone spell, at the same time hurling herself backward into Fowler's arms. They fell onto the deck together, leaving their attacker's great jaws to clap shut on empty air.

A pearly sheen swept over the head of the great fish and down its huge body. The creature squirmed farther onto the raft, forcing Ruha and Fowler to the very edge of

the vessel's high side. It slapped the water with its tail, driving itself

forward, and the magical luster of the witch's spell suddenly drained from its gritty skin. The beast grew as drab and gray as ash, and the duller it became, the slower it moved. By the time its jaws were within striking range, the monster's entire body had grown as drab and motionless as a mudstone sculpture.

Captain Fowler stretched a tentative leg toward the gaping jaws and, when his foot did not get bitten off, pushed the monstrous head off the raft. The fish slipped from sight and vanished beneath the dark water as swiftly as a stone.
The witch slumped onto the deck and began fumbling at her buckle, praying she could stay conscious long enough to tie her belt around her bleeding leg.

Ruha had barely unlocked the clasp before her head thudded onto the planks and her vision went entirely black. She felt Fowler's stout fingers tugging at the belt, then the tinny sound of a man's fading voice: "Hey! These sharks..."

Sometime later, the witch awoke to a throbbing leg and the sound of arguing voices.

"... witch for?" whined the sailor. "She's the reason we're here, I say!"

"I don't give a squid's lips what you say, Arvold! I order a man to swim, I'll

not have to throw him!"

Ruha tried to open her eyes, found the effort too tiring, and settled for reaching down to feel her savaged leg. Her thigh was girded by a crude tourniquet, and her aba was torn clear to the hip—that would cost her the use of a few sand spells, depending upon how easy she found it to reconstruct the torn symbols. Her flesh was not yet numb and still warm to the touch, so the witch guessed she had been unconscious no more than two or three minutes.

"There'd have been no need to throw me, if it were worth going in," growled Arvold. "But there was no call to swim for the witch. We should've let the sharks take her."

"That's for the captain to say, not you!" Captain

Fowler's declaration was followed by the creak of a weapon's blade being torn from a plank. "I've no use for cowards, sailmender!"

"Captain Fowler, you have little room to be calling other men cowards." The spell ofloudness had lapsed when Ruha fell unconscious, so her voice sounded as weak and frail as that of any woman who had nearly bled to death. "I fail to see how a man who hurls another into danger is any braver than his victim."

The witch forced her eyes open and raised her head.
Her two companions sat on the front of the raft, each facing the other from
his own corner. Captain Fowler, who was holding a boarding axe in his fist,
brought the weapon down and buried its head in the edge of a plank.

"It's a good thing you were the one in the water, not me." Fowler glared at his
sailmender. "Do you think
Arvold would've pulled us back? He'd have left us to the sharks and thanked
Umberlee for the chum."

Ruha let her head fall back to the deck, then rolled it to one side so she could
study Arvold's face. The sailmender had a sharp-featured face with a hawkish
nose and dark, glistening eyes, and in his expression there was no denial of
anything Fowler claimed. Still, whether he had done it willingly or not, Arvold
had saved the witch at the peril of his own life, and she was not so far gone
from Anauroch that she had forgotten what such an act meant to a Bedine.

"Perhaps what Captain Fowler claims is true, Arvold."
Ruha said. "But even so, you saved my life at the risk of your own. Until I have
done the same, I am yours to command."

Captain Fowler winced at the statement. Arvold's lips curled into a lecherous

grin, and he ran his dark gaze up the witch's exposed leg, over her bare hip,
and up to her dark, ripe lips.

Ruha's cheeks burned with embarrassment, for she was unaccustomed to having men
ogle her naked face.
Save for her short tenure as a spy in Voonlar, she had

ignored the Heartland women's custom of baring their visages in public,
preferring to keep her own face concealed beneath a heavy scarf. All that she
usually showed were her brown eyes, her aquiline nose, and, when her veil
slipped low, the tribal hash marks tattooed on her cheeks.

"Well now!" Arvold continued to leer. "That changes things."

Ruha turned away, raising a hand to cover her face. "I
did not mean I would…" The words caught in her dry throat. "My words did not
imply what you think. In
Anauroch, they are a pledge of allegiance and debt."

"We're not in the desert, witch!" Arvold snarled. "We're in the middle of the
bloody Dragonmere—and I say you owe me something for that, too!"

The raft bounced gently as Arvold crawled across the deck. Ruha let her hand
drop to her jambiya, both angered by the fool's lechery and frightened she would
have to slay him to save her honor. He could not believe she had meant to offer

herself as a woman—or could he?
She raised herself on an elbow and looked toward the sailmender. He stopped just
beyond her reach, his gaze fixed on the curved dagger at her belt.

As Arvold contemplated his next move, a dark fog began to gather at the edges of
Ruha's vision. The sharp angles of the sailmender's face seemed to soften before
her, and his rough complexion grew smooth and yellowish. His hawkish nose
shrank to a more graceful size and curved upward at the end. Folds of skin
appeared at the corner of his eyes, giving them a narrow, slanted appearance,
and his hair turned black and silky.

Ruha's hand loosened around her dagger, but she did not gasp, or even worry that
she was falling into unconsciousness again. She had been suffering visions
since before she could walk, so she recognized the change in
Arvold's face for what it was: a mirage from the future.
Sometime soon, she would meet a man with the face that had appeared over the
sailmender's. She could not say

what would happen then, but she doubted it would be anything good. It was
never anything good.

Ruha's first mirage had been of thousands of butterflies. Later that year, her
tribe had been forced to camp at an oasis infested with

moths, and soon every
piece of cloth in the khowwan was full of holes. Later, the face of a handsome
stranger had appeared over that of her husband, Ajaman. Ajaman had died that
night; the handsome stranger had arrived soon after to help Ruha's people
fight the ones who had murdered her husband.
She had eventually taken the stranger, the Harper named Lander, as a lover—only
to see him felled by the same enemy that had slain Ajaman.

Noticing Ruha's distraction, Arvold slid forward, still wearing the face of a
slant-eyed stranger. When he stretched a hand toward her dagger, his fingers
suddenly changed into sharp talons. The flesh of his arm turned black and scaly,
and the pupils of his eyes narrowed into vertical slits with irises as black as
obsidian. A crest of jet-colored fins sprouted along his back, and the long,
lashing tail of a dragon appeared at the base of his spine.

Ruha tried to pull her jambiya, but the sailmender's claw lashed out quick as a
serpent and caught her wrist.
She cried out and slammed her forehead into the strange face. Arvold raised his
free hand to slap her, and it, too, was a black claw.

Captain Fowler appeared behind his sailmender and caught the man's scaly arm.
Arvold's dragon tail disappeared instantly, as did his scales, his talons, and
his crest of dark fins. His pupils grew round, the yellowish

tint vanished from
his skin, his nose grew hawkish again, and Fowler continued to hold his wrist.

"Arvold, you know what the witch meant to say. Do you really want to hold her to
the letter of what she said, knowing what she's liable to do if you anger her?"

The sailmender continued to stare at Ruha's bare face, his leer more angry than
lustful. Though she felt bashful and naked without her veil, the witch forced
herself to

return his gaze with an icy glare.

At last, Arvold released the witch's arm. "Ah, Umberlee take you!" He pushed
himself to his corner of the raft.
"If that's how you repay your debts, I'll have nothing to do with you."

Ruha let her head fall back onto the deck, weakened by both her vision and the
trouble with Arvold.

Captain Fowler's swinish face appeared over her.

"Sorry I didn't move faster, Witch," he whispered. "But after you nearly called
me a coward, I—"

Ruha raised a hand. "Do not apologize, Captain. You warned me before not to
question your judgment—and I

should have been able to handle Arvold without your help."

Fowler nodded. "Aye, any Harper should've, but you hesitated—and why you let him grab your dagger arm, I'll never know."

"I have lost a lot of blood," Ruha said.

The witch balked at telling Fowler about the mirage, for she had long ago learned that few people understood her visions. Her own tribe had banished her from their camps, believing her wicked magic caused the calamities she foresaw. Even in the Heartlands, she had twice been stoned for warning people of disasters about to befall them, and once she had been accosted for not foreseeing a catastrophe that befell the flirtatious young daughter of the mayor ofTeshwave.

The witch rolled her head away from Fowler. "Perhaps I was just too weak."

The captain checked the tourniquet on her leg, then laid his leathery palm on her forehead. "You're losing no more blood, but you do feel cold as a barnacle." He grabbed her chin and pulled it around so he could look her in the eye. "You wouldn't be thinking of dying on me, would you Witch?"

Ruha tried to chuckle and failed. "Not without your permission, Captain."

Fowler glared at her from the corner of one eye. "Aye,

that's good." He grabbed the collar of his tunic and turned it inside out,
displaying the Harper's pin Ruha had given to him. "I've every intention of
collecting on your promise—and don't think you can squirm out of it, like you
did with Arvold."

Ruha managed a weak smile. "Get me to Pros, and you shall have your ship."

"That I shall, Witch—and it'll be easier than you think." The captain grinned
broadly, then stood and turned toward the front of the raft. "Arvold, man your
paddle!"

Three

The caravel's bowsprit shot over the dune crest, less the twenty yards from the
raft. Beneath the giant spar, illuminated by the pearlescent sphere of a
silver glass lantern, hung the magnificent sculpture of a square-snouted
dragon. With its delicately curled horns, ball-shaped eyes, and lustrous green
scales, the beast looked nothing like the wyrm that had destroyed the Storm
Sprite. The figurehead's glowering face appeared more reproachful than
vicious, and there was nothing in its expression to suggest bloodlust or

insatiable greed. Still, the thing was clearly a dragon, and that was enough to
give Ruha pause.

The caravel's great prow burst through the back side of the dune, hurling
curtains of spray high into the air.
Ruha pointed at the figurehead.

"Do you see that, Captain Fowler? Is that not a dragon's head?"

The witch sat near the back corner of the raft, her mangled thigh extended
before her. During the twenty minutes it had taken Fowler and Arvold to paddle
into the caravel's path, everything below the tourniquet had grown numb and cool
to the touch, and now the leg was beginning to turn blue, as she could tell
whenever the moon's silver light flashed across her bare flesh.

When Captain Fowler did not comment on the figure-

head, Ruha asked, "Why does the caravel carry such a thing on its bow? Could
that be the reason the dragon
attacked it?"

Fowler set aside the plank he had been using as a paddle. "I think not, Witch.

Half the prows on the Dragonmere bear figureheads of such fiends, to scare off monsters of the deep."

Ruha studied the figurehead more carefully, then shook her head. "That carving does not look frightening to me."

The captain had no time to answer, for the bow of the great caravel was already slipping past. Along the wales stood a dozen dark figures, all shining storm lanterns over the rail. Both Fowler and Arvold jumped to their feet and waved their arms in excitement. From the shadows behind the lantern bearers emerged a figure holding a large bow nocked with a white, round-nosed arrow.

The man loosed his bowstring. The white shaft sailed over the raft, trailing a thick dark cord. Fowler let the line fall upon the planks, then grabbed it and pulled the arrow aboard. He snapped the shank at its base, then he and Arvold started to thread the rope through the raft lashings. As they worked, the caravel continued to lumber past, taking up the rescue line's slack at an alarming pace. The lantern bearers walked toward the great ship's stern, trying to keep their lights focused upon the raft.
The heaving sea made their task an impossible one, forcing Ruha's companions to labor in an irritating kaleidoscope of flashing beams. By

the time the pair
finished, the rescue line was stretching taut and the lantern bearers were
standing atop what remained of their ship's battered poop deck.

"Hold fast!"

Resuming his place at the front corner, Arvold fell to the deck and grabbed the
edges of the planks. Fowler dropped beside Ruha, flinging one arm over her
shoulders and pinning her to the wet planks. The witch had barely twined her
fingers into the lashings before the

rescue line snapped tight and jerked the raft so violently it left the water.

The flimsy vessel splashed into the water an instant later. From that moment on,
it seemed to Ruha that they spent as much time traveling beneath the surface as
they did above it. Every time they came to another sea dune, the rescue line
would drag them through its steep face, burying the raft under a foamy torrent
that threatened to sweep the witch and her companions into the Dragonmere. A
moment later, they would emerge on the other side and drop into the trough, then
slam into the face of the next dune and disappear beneath the raging sea.

Between dousings, Ruha gasped, "Surely, there is a—"

She grunted as they slammed into a trough. "—a better way to bring us aboard!"

The caravel pulled them through another sea dune.
When they came out the other side, Fowler asked, "Can you fly, Witch?"

"That is bird magic," Ruha answered. "If I could fly, why would… ugh!… why would
I have hired you to sail me across the Dragonmere?"

After they plunged through another dune. Fowler said,
"Then this is the only way. In a Sea this rough, a big ship like that can't be
stopping to take aboard passengers!"

They slammed into another trough; then the ride smoothed out as they entered the
caravel's wake. The ship's crew hauled the raft up to the stern corner and
lowered a rope. Fowler tied Ruha in first, and the line tightened around her
chest. She rose alongside the rudder more than fifteen feet before she reached
the somercastle and began to scrape along its back wall. The witch bit her lip
to keep from crying out. Though her mangled leg was too numb to feel anything,
she had many other cuts and bruises that protested the rough treatment.

After a painful ascent of another ten feet, several pairs of hands caught her
beneath the arms and pulled her into the ruins of a luxurious officer's cabin.
The walls, or rather what remained of them, were draped

with silken

tapestries depicting fanciful scenes of domestic bliss, and the floor was
covered by wool carpet as plush and finely loomed as those woven by Ruha's own
people.

A pair of rescuers leaned over the witch, and she gasped. Both men had smooth,
yellow-tinted features, with small noses and narrow, slanted eyes. Neither face
matched the one she had seen in her vision, but they obviously belonged to the
same race as the man in the
mirage.

The elder of the pair, a distinguished-looking man with graying hair and a
yellow patch over one eye, spoke to the other in a Kiting language of short
syllables and fluctuating pitches. Both men were slight of build and no taller
than Ruha herself, and they wore high-necked tunics with long sleeves and hems
that swept the floor.

When the first man finished speaking, the second bowed to him, then bowed to
Ruha. "Please to allow me to present Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu, Imperial Minister
of Spices to Emperor Kao Tsao Shou Tang, Jade—"

The one-eyed man hissed at the speaker, who continued his introduction with
barely a pause, "Jade Monarch of Shou Lung and of all

Civilized Lands."

The one-eyed man bowed to Ruha, who sat upright and dipped her chin in return.
Across the cabin, several more small, yellow-skinned men were hauling up the
other end of the rescue line, which they had tossed down to the raft once she
was aboard. Anxious to avoid being dragged overboard if their hands slipped, the
witch began to untie herself.

"I am called Ruha." She spoke directly to the one-eyed man, who could hardly
have corrected his translator without himself understanding Common. "I thank you
for saving my life, Minister Hsieh."

"Many thanks to you, also. You save Emperor's ship, and lives of many humble
servants." Hsieh bowed again, letting pass his facade of not speaking Common. He
motioned to a corner behind Ruha, and an old man with a knobby, shaven head
stepped out of the shadows.

"Please to allow physician to see leg."

"Physician?"

"The mandarin's healer," explained Hsieh's assistant.

When the witch nodded, the physician kneeled at her side and set a box of carved

ivory upon the floor. He pulled her tattered aba away to inspect the savaged leg
The constant deluge of sea water had kept the wound surprisingly clean, so Ruha
saw that the fish had cut a circular laceration into the side other thigh. The
bite was nearly a foot in diameter, and in one place so deep she saw a white
sliver of bone.

Captain Fowler clambered into the cabin and steppfc ~
brusquely to Ruha's side, mercifully drawing her atten tion away from her leg.
"How you faring? Will you live until I get my cog?"

Frowning at the half-ore's swinish face, Hsieh stepped back and called something
sharp through the cabin's shattered doorway.

Ruha cocked an eyebrow at Fowler. "Surely, you do not intend to be rude,
Captain." She gestured to the mandarin. "Allow me to present you to Minister
Hsieh Han
Liu, Imperial Minister of Spices to the Emperor Kao Tsao
Shou Tang—"

"Jade Dragon of Shou Lung and all civilized lands—I
know." Despite the undue emphasis he had placed on the word civilized, Fowler
bowed deeply to the mandarin.
"I've run cargo for the Ginger Palace a time or two—though I've never had the
pleasure of boarding one of your junks before."

Hsieh relaxed and once again called down the corridor, then

returned the
half-ore's bow—though not so deeply, and without taking his gaze from Fowler's
eyes.
"Captain Fowler? Then you give order to attack dragon?"

"Aye." Fowler nodded. "But it was the Lady Witch's idea, and her magic that
destroyed it."

Both the mandarin and his assistant regarded Ruha with renewed respect, and the
physician began to probe her wounds more gently. Hsieh bowed to Ruha again.

"Forgive my discourtesy, but you do not call yourself
Lady Ruha. Do you require anything?"

Ruha scowled, puzzled by Hsieh's reaction. She was accustomed to strange
reactions when people discovered she was a witch, but that did not seem to be
what troubled the mandarin.

"Please, Minister Hsieh, I am not…"

Fowler's head twisted ever so slightly from side to side.

Since the captain had at least some acquaintance with the Shou, Ruha decided to
follow his lead. "Please, I am not accustomed to showing my face. I need a shawl
and
veil."

Hsieh glanced at his translator, who said something into his ear. The mandarin scowled, and they had a short exchange, then the assistant bowed and scurried out of the cabin.

"Yu Po goes to fetch finest scarves from our cargo."

As Hsieh spoke, the physician pulled a pair of silver tongs from his box. The old man opened the instrument slightly and slipped the jaws into the deepest part of Ruha's wound, where she had glimpsed her white bone.

"Say if this hurt. Lady Ruha."

The physician closed the tongs, then worked them back and forth. Ruha heard a faint crunching sound. She felt a gentle vibration deep in her hip, but her leg had gone so numb below the tourniquet that she barely noticed the metal rubbing her mangled flesh. The old man gave his instrument a final twist and withdrew a huge triangle of serrated tooth.

"When the fish attacked, I... I heard something crack," Ruha gasped. "I thought the thing had broken my leg."

"Leg fine. Bone strong."

The physician returned his tongs to the ivory box and withdrew a handful of

yellow powder, which he carefully sprinkled into the bite. Once the entire gash
was filled with the dust, he half-whistled a series of strange, highpitched
syllables. The powder vanished with a flash of

golden light; then a ring of brownish smoke drifted from the wound and filled
the little cabin with the smell of brine and burnt flesh. The old man inspected
the results, then took a hooked needle and a length of black thread from his
box. When he began to sew, Ruha felt nothing more than an occasional tug.

The Shou crewmen soon pulled the raft's last survivor,
Arvold, into the cabin. Hsieh regarded the bedraggled sailmender with an
enigmatic gaze, scrutinizing the shabby tunic and the length of rope that held
up his trousers. He glanced at Captain Fowler, whose dress was only marginally
better, then looked back to Ruha for an introduction.

"The sailmender," Ruha explained.

"Put him where you can watch him," warned Fowler.
"He's a hopeless thief, but he's good with a needle. I'd hate for you to lop off
one of his hands."

Hsieh raised his brow at the frank appraisal, then spoke to two of his men, who
promptly escorted the sailmender out of the cabin.

"They put him with others," explained the mandarin.

"Others?" Ruha could not keep the hope out other voice. She considered the
sinking of the Storm Sprite her doing, and it would ease her conscience to hear
the crew had survived. "How many did you save?"

Hsieh's lip curled disdainfully, whether at the witch's concern or the memory of
the human dregs his crew had dragged from the sea, Ruha did not know.

"We save ten men," the mandarin reported. "But tonrongs do not treat them
well."

"Tonrongs?" Ruha asked.

"Sharks," Fowler explained. "The lions of the sea, 'cept they eat anything, and
they're always hungry."

Hsieh nodded. "Yes. Tonrongs take limbs from four of your men, and they soon
die."

Ruha felt a guilty emptiness in her stomach. Unless they found more survivors,
three-quarters of the Storm
Sprite's crew would perish. She let a weary groan slip

from her lips, which caused the physician to jerk his
bloody finger out other wound.
"So sorry. Lady! Did not mean to cause pain."
Fowler regarded Ruha with renewed concern, then

turned to the physician. "She going to die before we reach port?"

The physician's shaved scalp turned an angry orange. "Not die at all! I treat Emperor once!" He tried to slip a finger under Ruha's tourniquet and barely succeeded, then nodded his head approvingly. "Not even lose leg— maybe."

Ruha mewled, then clamped her jaw shut to keep from showing any more fear. Despite her efforts, her lips began to tremble and beads of cold sweat rolled down her brow.

Hsieh spoke harshly to the old man, who paled and stooped even closer to his work.

"I tell physician if you lose leg, he lose leg. But if he fail anyway, I give you leg's weight in gold." The generous offer drew an astonished gasp from Fowler, but the mandarin was not finished. "Also, Emperor's treasury pays for loss of ship, and more, when we reach Ilipur."

Deciding it would be wiser to let Hsieh draw his own conclusions about who owned the Storm Sprite, Ruha said, "My business is in Pros, Minister Hsieh. I under stand it is on the way. Perhaps you would put us ashore there?"

A look of chagrin flashed across the mandarin's face. "All our gold vanish with dragon. Nothing left on Ginger Lady but spice and ylang blossom."

"Nevertheless, I prefer—"

"Lady Witch, Ilipur's but a short distance up the shore." Fowler narrowed his eyes, trying to fill his glower with subtle menace. "It'll take only a few days extra."

Ruha returned Fowler's glare with a disdainful glance. "And what of the people I am to meet in Pros? How long will they wait?" She looked back to Hsieh. "Put us ashore in Pros, and I will ask only one reward of you."

Hsieh glanced at her sodden aba, no doubt reevaluating his first impression of her wealth. Only a woman of great resources would decline the reward he had promised.

The mandarin inclined his head. "If it is in my power, I give you whatever you ask."

"Please tell me about the dragon. Why did it attack your ship?"

"That's our reward?" Fowler bellowed.

Hsieh's glance darted from Fowler to his crewmen.
Two men quickly flanked the captain, their heads rising barely as high as the
half-ore's brawny shoulders.

"Aboard Ginger Lady, even captain respect Lady."
Hsieh warned.

Fowler's eyes flashed at the admonishment, but he stood very still and made no
further protests.

Hsieh turned back to Ruha, arching his fine eyebrows.
"I do not understand question. Dragon attacks ship to steal gold. That is reason
dragon does anything."

Ruha shook her head. "That wyrm was not an ordinary one, nor does the Ginger
Lady seem an ordinary ship
The creature attacked you for another reason, and the reward I ask is that you
tell me why."

A nervous croak slipped from Fowler's lips. Before the sound could become a
word, the guards seized his hands and folded his wrists inward against their
joints. The half-ore hissed in pain and looked away from the witch.

The mandarin pretended not to notice the captain's slip, but his face lost all

expression and became as unreadable as a stone. "I do not understand, Lady Ruha.
Why do you believe we know dragon?"

The image of a yellow face changing into a black dragon flashed through Ruha's
mind, but she did not even consider telling Hsieh about the mirage. Judging by
Fowler's reactions so far, the Shou were a dangerous people, and she had no idea
how they might react to her visions.

Ruha paused to pick her words, then said, "Does the

Ginger Lady not carry a dragon's figurehead on her prow? And was my captain
mistaken when he called your emperor the Jade Dragon instead of the Jade
Monarch?"

Fowler closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief.

The mandarin showed no sign of anger—or any other emotion. "Lady Ruha, greatest
dragons are not evil. I do not know why evil dragon attacks Ginger Lady, except
to take gold. I go to Elversult on unfortunate business that has nothing to do
with dragon. I never see that dragon before."

"This unfortunate business you speak of, could it involve the dragon?" Ruha
asked.

The narrowing of Hsieh's eyes was barely perceptible, but it

was enough to alarm
Fowler.

"Lady Ruha, the Shou are an honorable bunch."
Though the captain struggled to keep his tone deferential, Ruha could hear
both anger and fear lurking just beneath the surface. "If the mandarin's
business has something to do with the dragon, he'd say so. It's—uh—bad manners
to hint he's holding back."

Hsieh nodded. "Am so sorry. Lady Ruha, but you make poor bargain to trade your
due for what little I know of dragon. Perhaps I find some other way to reward
your noble service." The mandarin spoke to his men, then went to the cabin's
shattered doorway and bowed to
Ruha. "Until then, I am most happy to leave you in Pros."

Four

'tThe sky above the Ginger Palace
't-^ was lucid and azure, as it could be nowhere but the arid plain south of the
city ofElversult. Anticipating a pleasant morning of solitude in the confines of
his private park. Prince
Tang crossed the humped back of Five
Color Bridge, strode down the opalpaved Path of Delight, and stopped beneath
the iridescent curve of the Arch ofMany-Hued Scales.

From the sleeve pocket of his maitung—the long silken tunic favored by Shou
noblemen—the prince withdrew a large golden key. It was shaped like a
chameleon's head, with broad shoulder flanges and a sinuous blade resembling a
long, flickering tongue. He rapped the top three times against the entryway's
red-lacquered gates, then inserted the blade into a brass keyway, turned the
latch, and pushed the heavy portals aside.

Prince Tang did not find his pets arrayed before the gate, as they customarily
were. Instead, the rocky plaza was strangely barren, save for a half dozen
buzzing, blueblack mounds scattered along one edge. Beyond the droning fly
clusters, twenty quartzite boulders imported from
Calimshan had been torn from their footings and strewn over the carefully shaped
dunes of the park's desert quarter. In the forest region, circles of bark had
been scratched around the trunks of the most exotic trees, and in the

iungle zone, the meticulously strung jasmine vines lay sliced and twined about
the base of the bamboo stalks.
The swamp area was covered with tangled mats of pink and blue and yellow,
decorative grasses torn from the bottom and left to drift on the murky waters,
while the lotus blossoms and lily pads had been thrown onto

the muddy bank to
wither and die.

Tang could see only one of his pets, an elusive, jetblack river monitor. The
great lizard had dragged itself from the swamp and stretched its fifteen-foot
length over a stone bench, leaving its webbed feet, thick tail, and slender head
to dangle over the sides. The beast's neck was twisted toward the gate, as
though it had been awaiting the prince's arrival when the last gleam of hope
seeped from its dull eyes.

Tang stared at the lifeless monitor for several bewildered moments, then
finally realized that some contemptible barbarian had violated the sanctity of
his garden. He retreated through the Arch ofMany-Hued Scales, screaming as though he had been stabbed.

At the first shriek, a company of ten sentries appeared on the Path of Delight,
emerging from camouflaged posts behind the walkway's white-blossomed hedges. In
the blink of an eye, Tang was encircled by a bristling wall of scale-armored men
equipped with long, curve-bladed halberds. They neither touched their master
nor inquired as to the reason for his scream, but simply stood ready to obey his
orders and defend his life.

Prince Tang entered his garden again, his protective shell of soldiers

compressing around him as he passed through the arch. He stopped inside the
gateway, remaining silent while his guards examined the scene. He did not
speak until their tortoise-shell helmets had stopped pivoting on their shoulders
and the last gasp had fallen
silent.

"How does this happen?" demanded the prince. "Is it not your duty to protect
Garden of Flickering Tongues?"

The company officer, a young moon-faced noble named

Yuan Ti, dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the stones at Tang's
feet. "Mighty Prince, your guards fail you." Since his voice was directed at the
ground
Yuan sounded as though he were mumbling. "We see no one enter garden."

The prince snorted at the explanation. "How could it be otherwise? If you see
intruder, he would be dead would he not?" Only Tang himself used the garden; not
even his wife, Princess Wei Dao, was allowed inside.
Though Yuan could not see the gesture with his head pressed to the ground, the
prince waved his hand at the destruction. "But does no one hear falling of
stones, or scratching of trees, or ripping of vines?"

Yuan kept his brow pressed to the ground. "Great Majesty, your unworthy guards hear nothing, smell nothing, feel nothing.
Please to punish."

Tang ignored the request. "Go search garden."

The prince could not imagine how his guards had missed the sound of the park being destroyed, but he knew the young noble would never lie to him. No Shou officer would commit such a treason, and not only because he feared for his family's heads. The offense would dishonor his ancestors, causing them to lose their places in the Celestial Bureaucracy—an offense said ancestors would surely repay with all manner of curses and incurable plagues.

While the guards searched the park, Tang retreated through the gate and waited outside, praying to the spirits of his ancestors to guide his sentries to the vandal who had destroyed his park. Although the imperial weaponmasters had taught him to wield a sword as well as any man, it did not even occur to him to stay in the garden and exact vengeance himself. From his earliest childhood, the prince had been taught to retreat from danger and call his guards to take care of the problem. It was a lesson he had not ignored once in thirty years of life.

At length, the sentries returned with unbloodied weapons and bowed to Tang.

"Garden of Flickering

Tongues is safe for Mighty Prince."
"You do not find vandal?"
Yuan shook his head. "Only lizards, and only lizard tracks."

Tang considered this, puzzled not by who had ravaged his garden or why—he knew the answers to both questions—but by how the intruder had infiltrated the heart of his palace, vandalized the park, and escaped with his life. Truly, such a feat was as worthy of admiration as it was of indignation.

When he could not think of how the culprit had escaped. Tang sighed wearily.
"How unfortunate you did not capture the intruder. He has given me much work to do." The prince always tended his garden himself, calling for aid only when he needed help to move something heavy. "Return to your posts and punish each other, ten lashes each."

The faces of the sentries fell. Given the magnitude of their failure, such a light punishment was humiliating.
Its temperance implied that Tang believed them incapable of doing better—which happened to be the case, though the prince did not fault the guards for their inadequacy. Even the most devoted sentries could not capture intruders they could not see or hear, or find trespassers who left no tracks.

Such tasks
required a wu-jen. Unfortunately, the Minister of Magic was currently at odds
with Tang's own sponsor, Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu, the
Imperial Minister of Spices. Consequently, the Emperor's wu-jens were considered
too valuable to waste on an inconsequential embassy like the Ginger Palace. Such
political frustrations were a daily part of the prince's life, and one of the
many reasons he preferred the company of lizards to that of men.

Tang waited until the last guard had stepped aside, then took his key from the
red-lacquered gates and stepped through the Arch ofMany-Hued Scales. When he
turned to close the gates, he glimpsed his guards glumly marching toward the
Five Color Bridge and decided it

would not do to have them brooding over their failure.
They were an elite company, and an elite company without honor was nothing.

"One thing more, my soldiers," he called. "You must double lashes for any man
who fails to draw blood with each whip stroke."

The guards bowed in acknowledgment, and Yuan could barely keep from smiling.
"Yes, Mighty Prince."

Tang closed the gate and put the key in his sleeve pocket, leaving the lock

unlatched in case the mysterious vandal returned. He fetched a small shovel, a
linen sack, and a copper bucket from a tool shanty near the jungle quarter, then
took a deep breath and went to the first mound of flies. As he slid the shovel
beneath the droning heap, the insects rose into the air, revealing a pile of
rancid lizard viscera. Fighting his gorge back, he scooped up the entrails and
placed them in the sack, then filled his bucket from the swamp and washed the
stones.

The work was humiliating for a prince, of course, but
Tang preferred doing it himself to having the serenity of his garden disturbed
by servants. He cleaned up the other mounds of viscera, then placed the bulging
sack by the gate. The entrails had obviously come from the belly of his dead
monitor, for none of the other lizards were large enough to hold so many
intestines. What the prince did not understand was how the intruder had known
itwas his favorite pet, a rare beast captured in the distant land of Chult.
Only his personal staff knew how dearly he had paid for the creature, and they
would no sooner betray him than his guards would.

Tang returned his tools to the shanty, then went over to the dead monitor. He
waved aside a cloud of flies and grabbed the beast by its rear legs.

The beast jerked its feet from the prince's grasp.

Tang cried out and stepped away, his gaze dropping to the black stains that
covered the bench and the stones beneath it. The stuff looked like dried blood,
and the rancid, coppery smell certainly suggested appearances were

correct. He did not see how the monitor could have lost so much blood and
lived. The great lizard raised its head, fixing a dull-eyed gaze on the prince's
face.

"Guards!" Tang stumbled backward toward the gate.
"Yuan! Come quickly!"

The monitor glanced at the gate, and Tang heard the sharp double click of the
heavy lock-bolt sliding into its catch. He fished the key from his sleeve pocket
and continued to retreat, fighting down his growing panic and trying to decide
whether he dared turn his back to make a dash for the gate.

Tang, you cannot flee me.

Tang heard the voice not with his ears, but inside his mind. It was raspy and
rumbling, and even if it had come from the monitor's mouth, it would have been
much too resonant for a lacertilian throat.

That much, you should remember.

"Cy-Cypress?"

The monitor nodded, and Tang's feet suddenly felt as heavy as boulders. At first, the prince thought the lizard had cast a spell on him, but he quickly realized that was impossible. The beast had uttered no mystic syllables, nor made any arcane gestures with its claws. Instead, Cypress was using what the Shou called the Invisible Art, an ancient discipline whose practitioners employed nothing but the power of their own minds to perform supernatural acts. Tang had heard that his unwelcome guest was a master of the venerable art, but until now, he had been lucky enough to avoid a demonstration.

Tang's guards arrived at the park entrance and began to hammer on the gates, but they could not break through with anything short of a battering ram. Both portals were reinforced with heavy bands of steel, while the lock itself was the sturdiest Shou smiths could make. The sentries could not even scale the wall, as it was capped with a double crest of barbed spikes.

Cypress slunk off the bench, allowing Tang to glimpse a deep, white-fleshed gash that ran the entire length of

the monitor's belly. The beast trundled across the plaza on four stubby legs,

then stopped next to the prince's knee and rolled its lifeless gaze over his
maitung.

Given that we have not seen you in so long, I find this altogether pretentious,

The lizard's tongue darted out to snap at Tang's maitung, which was tailored
with overlapping brown patches resembling the spade-shaped scales of an armored
skink.

How long has it been since you attended Lair?

"You know I resign."

Cypress slipped behind his captive and lashed out with the monitor's huge tail,
catching Tang behind the knees and hurling him face first to the plaza. The
prince's nose and mouth erupted in stinging pain, and he felt the unaccustomed
sensation of warm blood spilling from his nostrils. He tried to rise and found
himself pinned to the ground, his entire body now as heavy as only his feet had
been a moment earlier. He screamed, more in rage than anguish, and wished that
he had a sword in his hand—and the strength to raise it.

The hammering at the gates ceased, then a sharp boom reverberated across the
plaza as several armored bodies slammed into the portals. The thick planks
creaked, but the lock did not give way. Cypress circled

around in front of the
prince, barely glancing toward the gates.
have told you, no one resigns from the Cult of the
Dragon!

The monitor took Tang's hand in its mouth. The prince cringed, fearing he would
soon have a bloody stump at the end of his wrist, but the powerful jaws did not
close.
Instead, the beast's agile tongue rolled over Tang's fingers, removing his
golden rings. After doing the same with the other hand, the dead lizard dropped
to its belly and stared the prince in the eye.

/ thank you for the offering. Now, where is my ylang oil?

"Where is Lady Feng?" Tang groaned. "You have oil
when I have mother."

A red ember sparked deep within the lizard's eye, then the beast dragged one
huge claw across the prince's face.

"You dare scratch me?" Tang squawked, astonished that even a spiteful creature
like Cypress would mark a person of Imperial Shou blood. He spat on the beast's
snout, then added, "For that, you die thousand deaths!"

The monitor's gaping jaws opened as though to chomp
Tang's head off; then the beast tipped its head sideways and did not bite. I

think I shall!

A deep, rumbling laugh—more like a cough—rolled up from someplace deep in the monitor's hollow stomach, and Cypress laid one of the lizard's heavy claws on the prince's shoulder.

I shall die a thousand deaths—a thousand deaths at least!

Cypress removed the foot from Tang's shoulder and backed away, still chuckling. The prince found that his body no longer seemed quite so heavy. He gathered himself up and stood, one hand pinching his bloody nose. Another boom echoed across the plaza. The monitor's head turned so that it could watch the arch with one drab eye and Tang with the other.

Lady Feng informs me that only you know how to press the ylang blossoms, so I will spare your life—but I am losing patience. If I do not have the oil by tomorrow, I shall start returning your mother in parts.

"What you ask is impossible! Pressing blossoms take one week—"

Don't lie to me! I know how long you need to prepare the oil! The monitor whirled away and started across the plaza. Tomorrow.

A double click sounded beneath the Arch of Many-Hued Scales. The gates burst open, and Yuan led the guards

into the garden.
Several of the men were only half dressed and bleeding from their whip cuts.
Their eyes went first to the prince's bloody face, then to the

lumbering monitor. To a man, they lowered their halberds and charged.

"No! Stand—"

Tang's command came too late. Cypress ran the monitor's dark gaze from one end
of the company to the other.
As the black eyes fell on each sentry, the man wailed and slapped his palms to
his ears, letting his weapon fly from his hands. In a breath's span, all ten
guards lay writhing on the ground, screaming madly and bleeding from their ears.
The lizard sauntered calmly into the squad's midst, paused to suck the silver
honor ring off each man's thumb, and walked out the gate. By the time Cypress
had lumbered down the Path of Delight onto the Five
Color Bridge, the last sentry had curled into a tight ball and lay staring at
the ground in front of him through gray, sunken eyeballs.

Tang sank to his knees and looked numbly around his garden, absentmindedly
counting all the boulders and trees he would have to replace. At least now he
knew how the vandal had penetrated the heart of his palace; without a wu-jen,
even the most elaborate traps and precautions were doomed to fail against a

master of the Invisible
Art.

From beneath the Arch of Many-Hued Scales came a soft-voiced cough. Tang turned
and saw the lithe form of his diminutive wife, Wei Dao, standing in the gateway.
She had apparently come from her gymnasium, for her brow was wet with sweat, and
she wore a black samfu, a long-sleeved uniform in which she always dressed to
practice empty-hand defense. Today, her attire also included a red throat scarf.
Despite her ruffled hair and flushed complexion, the princess looked as striking
as ever, with generous painted lips, high cheeks, and a watchful, sloe-eyed
gaze.

Wei Dao bowed. "Mighty Prince, please forgive intrusion, but I hear terrible
commotion."

Her eyes darted from her husband's blood-smeared face to the fallen guards, but
she made no comment on

their condition and did not move to help them. As Tang's wife, such things
were as far beneath her dignity as that of the prince himself; at their first
convenience, one of them would inform the commander of the guard that some of
his men were in need of attention.

"I see Chult lizard crossing Five Color Bridge," said Wei Dao. "It looks in no condition to walk."

Tang rose and crossed the plaza to his wife. "We have unwelcome visitor." He left the garden and pulled the red-lacquered gates shut behind him. "We need wu-jen."

Wei Dao considered this a moment, then asked, "To stop dragon?" Then, as though there could be some question of which dragon she meant, she added, "To stop

Cypress?"

Tang nodded. "I do not understand why, but he comes himself." Cypress seldom ventured from the gluttonous comfort of his lair and would normally have sent his high priestess, Indrith Shalla, to deliver the threat. "And he leaves in body of monitor. Why does dragon want carcass of giant lizard?"

Wei Dao's eyes flashed. "What do we care?" She took the scarf from around her neck, revealing the fading remnants of an ugly skin rash, and dabbed at Tang's bloodsmeared face. "Give him ylang oil before he kill Lady

Feng."

Tang winced at his wife's ministrations. "He does not kill Lady Feng. She is safe."

Wei Dao began to scrub the claw marks on her husband's cheeks—harder than necessary, it seemed to him.
"If dragon kills mother, you lose all honor before Emperor. We never return to Tai Tung. We spend rest of our lives exiled from court."

Tang could think of worse fates, but he did not dare say so in the presence of his ambitious wife. "Lady Feng is safe." He pulled Wei Dao's hands away from his stinging face. "I know."

The princess scowled and tried another tack. "Still better to give Cypress what he wants. If Lady Feng is not

here when Minister Hsieh arrives, there be many questions. How do you explain that Cult of Dragon steals Third Virtuous Concubine?"

Tang pulled away from his wife and pushed his key into the gate lock. "I cannot give Cypress what he wants."

Wei Dao's perfect mouth twisted into a doubtful frown.
"What do you mean? I see hundreds of ylang blossoms in spicehouse."

"All picked in evening." Tang turned the key and heard the double click of the bolt shooting into the catch. When the commander of the guard came to fetch his men, he would have to be entrusted with the key. There was nothing else to be

done; certainly, the garden could not be left unlocked. The prince faced his
wife, then said, "Ylang blossoms picked in evening are not potent."

"Not potent?"

Tang shrugged. "They are good for balms and teas, but potion made from those
blossoms does not last. Only flowers picked in morning have strength to make
perma nent love potion."

Wei Dao narrowed her sloe-eyed gaze. "Why do w have only weak blossoms?"

"Because strong blossoms do not keep long. Even i journey from Shou Lung is
short, they spoil before we sel them all."

Wei Dao shook her head in open disbelief. "No. You d not want venerable mother
to return! You like life of bar barian!"

Unaccustomed to being addressed in such tones, ever by his own wife, the prince
raised his hand—then founi
Wei Dao's wrist pressed against his own, blocking hi strike.

They glared into each other's eyes for a moment, thei
Tang asked, "What if I press oil and spell fails? Wha does Cypress do to Lady
Feng then?"

Wei Dao looked away and did not answer.

"Then we do this my way," Tang said. "We wait to;

Hsieh's ship—then I press oil."

Wei Dao's face paled. "You mean…?"

"Yes." Tang nodded. "Blossoms come on Ginger Lady."

The princess's eyes grew as round as saucers. "And you do not tell Cypress?"

Tang scowled at her naivete. "Secret of oil is to press morning-picked blossoms.
If we tell Cypress, do you think he returns Lady Feng to us?"

Wei Dao lowered her gaze in a practiced show of deference. "My husband, your
wisdom outshines the sun." She even managed a blush. "Please to excuse. I go do
penance
for my doubts."

Tang smiled benevolently, then dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "Do not be
hard on yourself."

"Oh, but I must." Wei Dao bowed very low, then turned to scurry down the Path of
Delight.

Five

The harbor at Pros seemed equal parts quicksand and mudflat, with just enough

water to float the flatbottomed scow carrying the Storm Sprite's survivors toward shore. Ruha sat beside Captain Fowler in the front of the boat—it seemed ludicrous to call the square end a bow—scanning the shanty town ahead. Most of the buildings were gray, ramshackle affairs in desperate need of a lime wash. The huts closest to the water hovered above the beach on flimsy stilts that looked ready to pitch their loads into the mud at the slightest push. A half-dozen rickety docks jutted far out into the bay. Two of the piers were empty;

the rest bustled with fishermen unloading their take.

As the scow approached shore, Ruha noticed that most of the catch had the same high dorsal fins and wedgeshaped heads as the vicious fish that had swarmed her.
The witch could not even guess how many sharks lay piled upon the piers, but there were close to two-dozen boats unloading the sharp-toothed monsters.

Ruha looked over her shoulder to the scow pilot, a sour-faced man with leathery skin and unkempt gray hair. "That seems like a great number of sharks. Do the people of Pros eat nothing else?"

"They're not for us," the pilot replied. "The Cult of the

Dragon buys all we can take—and it pays mighty well,

I'll add."

Fowler scowled at this. "What for? Shark's hardly a good-eating fish."

The pilot shrugged. "No one knows, and no one's asked. Since the Cult came to town, we've learned to keep our noses out of their business. You'd be wise to do the same."

The pilot barked a command to his rowers, and the vessel angled toward one of the empty piers. A small gang of shoremen emerged from the shanties and wandered down the dock, preparing to unload a cargo the boat did not carry.

Fowler gnashed his tusks, then stood to inspect the small crowd more carefully. "I don't see Vaerana Hawklyn." He glared down at Ruha's face, veiled behind a beautiful silk scarf given to her by Minister Hsieh, and fingered the Harper's pin fastened inside his robe. "If she's not here, how doyou plan to pay me?"

"Vaerana will meet us." The statement was more one of hope than conviction; it had taken the disabled caravel five days to sail the short distance from the battle site to

Pros, putting Ruha ashore four days late. "And even if she does not, I have been given a local name."

"Jonas Tempaltar? No cooper I know has the gold to buy a cog." Fowler cast a longing glance toward the Ginger Lady, which still lay anchored in the bay, awaiting a small load of supplies needed to complete her most pressing repairs. "It's not too late to go to Ilipur."

"Captain, if you wish to return to the Ginger Lady alone, perhaps Minister Hsieh will give you the reward."

"Not bloody likely." During the voyage to Pros, it had grown apparent that while Hsieh felt indebted to Ruha, he considered Captain Fowler little better than an animal, hardly worthy of notice, and certainly not deserving of reward. "I'll see my gold from the cooper first."

The scow scraped over a mud bar, then slowed as it approached the pier. As the stubby vessel drifted alongside the dock, the pilot commanded his crew to raise oars.

The rowers stowed their equipment and threw mooring ropes to the shoremen, who quickly pulled the boat to the dock and tied it to the piles.

A pair of large warriors in steel breastplates stepped forward to peer into the
empty hold. Both men wore black caps embroidered with the hastily sewn emblem of
a dragon's head.

"No cargo, William?"

The pilot motioned at Ruha and her fellow survivors.
"Only these castaways." He glanced at the emblem on the warriors' black caps,
then added, "A dragon sank their ship."

"That so?" The speaker sneered and glanced at his companion. "That's too bad for
them, ain't it, Godfrey?"

Godfrey nodded. "Terrible, Henry—but they've still got to pay the harbor tax."
He raised a finger and pointed it at each of the survivors. "Let's see, I count
eleven people.
That'll be eleven silver."

"Eleven silver!" Ruha protested. "That's—"

"That's a sight too much," Fowler interrupted. He shot
Ruha a warning scowl, then motioned at two one-legged sailors who had so far
outlived their amputations. "We lost most of our silver when my ship sank.
Besides, you can see some of us aren't whole. We shouldn't have to pay full for
them."

Godfrey eyed the pair's bloody stumps, then laughed

heartily. "Very well,
half-fee for the half-men. Ten silver."

Fowler glanced at the long swords hanging from the men's belts, then spread his
hands. "We cannot pay your price."

It was a lie, for Ruha still had twenty silver coins that had been inside her
aba when the Storm Sprite sank, but she did not contradict the captain.

Fowler reached inside his own tunic and withdrew two coins. "How about two
silver?"

"For two silver, we will not let you spit on the dock."
This time, it was Henry who spoke.

Fowler shrugged in resignation, then turned away

from the two warriors. "Pros used to be an honest place. I don't know what happened."

Godfrey peered over the half-ore's shoulder, then motioned to Ruha's jambiya.
"Let me see that knife. Perhaps we can let you ashore in exchange for that and
the two silver."

"No." Ruha motioned to the coins in Fowler's hands.
"Take those coins or nothing. I will not let you have my jambiya"

Godfrey's eyes hardened, then he and Henry drew their swords. The pilot and his

two rowers leapt out of the scow, and the gang of shoremen backed down the pier.
Fowler picked up an oar, as did Arvold and two more healthy crewmen. The eyes of
the two armored warriors widened at the unanticipated opposition. They glanced
around the quay at the smirking faces of the shoremen and the scow crew, then
gathered their nerve and stepped to within a pace of the scow.

Godfrey stretched his hand toward Ruha. "The dagger—and the silver."

Fowler looked to Ruha. Tour call. Lady Witch."

"Witch?" The color drained from the faces of both warriors, and Henry
whispered, "Maybe we oughta call for some help."

Ruha blew a breath into her hands and began the incantation of a wind spell that
would silence the men's voices—then abruptly stopped as the clamor of galloping
hooves reverberated down the pier. All eyes turned shoreward to see three
riders charging down the quay, two holding cocked crossbows in their hands, the
third leading a string of empty mounts.

The trio was coming so fast the scow crew and shoremen had to leap off the
quay to avoid being ridden down.
Ruha saw that the first rider was a sturdy, florid-faced woman with a flyaway
mane of honey-blonde hair. Like her two companions, she

wore an indistinct cloak
over a coat of chain mail and carried a large mace in a sling on her saddle. The
second rider was a grim-jawed man with

a drooping black mustache and stony black eyes, while the third was a rotund
cleric with the heavy silver chain of a holy symbol showing above his collar.
They reined up just short of Godfrey and Henry, and the two with crossbows
aimed their weapons at the two ruffians.

Both warriors lowered swords, and Godfrey hissed,
"Vaerana Hawklyn!"

"You know me?" Vaerana asked. "Too bad for you."

She shot the man in throat. Her companion did likewise to Henry, drawing a
chorus of angry cries from the other quays. Vaerana nonchalantly glanced toward
the shouting, then dismounted and stomped to the edge of the pier.

"Sorry we weren't waiting when you docked, Tusks!" she said, grabbing Fowler's
hand and pulling him onto the pier. "We were expecting the Storm Sprite!"

"We had some dragon trouble." Fowler glanced at the other quays, where dozens of
shouting, black-capped warriors were rushing toward shore, intent on avenging
their comrades' deaths. "Have you lost your mind, Lady

Constable?"

Vaerana waved off the captain's concern. "Don't worry about the Black Caps.
They've got a few surprises waiting for them." The Lady Constable turned to
Ruha. "You must be the witch Storm sent me."

"Ruha of the Mtair Dhafir at your service, Lady Constable." Ruha glanced at
the two corpses lying on the pier. "Their crime was not so terrible. Was it
truly necessary to kill them?"

Vaerana's eyes flashed with irritation. "Only if I don't want Cult assassins
waiting behind every hill on the way home," she growled. "Now, if you're through
interrogating me, can we get the hell out of here?"

"Yes, of course."

Feeling sheepish for questioning Vaerana's actions,
Ruha stepped over to the side of the scow. Although
Hsieh's physician had done a remarkable job of healing her wound—her thigh was
now swollen to only half-

again its normal size—the witch could not help limping as she moved.

"What happened?" Vaerana was looking not at Ruha, but at Fowler.

"Sharks." The half-ore waved a hand at his two amputees. "Them, too."

Vaerana looked the men over, then turned to her rotund horse-handler. "This is
going to be more difficult than we thought, Tombor."

"We have a little time." Tombor was staring toward the shore, where the Black
Caps were already ducking for cover as a hail of crossbow bolts rained down on
them from the windows of several huts. "Let's just hope that once we're mounted,
we can charge out of town as easily as we sneaked in."

"Maybe we should leave the one-legs here," Fowler suggested, helping Ruha out
of the scow. "They aren't much good to me, and the ride's liable to kill them
anyway."

Vaerana shook her head. "Can't do it, Tusks. The
Cult's worse than ever; a ride on a galloping horse will seem like fun compared
to what the Black Caps would do to them." She turned to the grim-jawed rider who
had killed Henry. "Pierstar, you and Tombor see to the crew.
I'll take care of Tusks and the witch."

Pierstar jumped into the scow to help the amputees, while Tombor directed the
rest of the crew to come around to the left side of the horses—he had to say
'port'
before they understood what he wanted. Vaerana led
Ruha and the captain to the first pair of spare mounts.

The Lady Constable held out the reins of the first horse. "You

can ride, can't
you. Witch?"

"Yes, I think so."

Ruha's reply was unduly modest, for she had grown up riding camels. Compared to
those cantankerous brutes, even the most spirited stallion was child's play. She
took the reins, gathered up her aba, and slipped her foot into the stirrup. Her
only awkward moment came when she had to swing her injured leg over the saddle
and did not

quite succeed. A fiery ache shot through her entire body.
In the tongue of her father, she cursed all fish and wished them a frigid death
in seas as cold as ice.

Once Vaerana saw that Ruha could handle her own mount, she passed the reins of
the second to Fowler.
"How about you, Captain? Can you ride?"

"If I can handle a ship's helm, I can steer a dumb animal."

The captain picked Godfrey's sword up off the pier, then clumsily thrust his
large foot into a stirrup and hoisted himself into the saddle. By the time
Fowler's sailors were ready to ride, the Black Caps on shore had broken through
the hail of crossbow bolts. They were advancing through the streets toward the

end of the quay, where dozens of armored horsemen, all dressed in a similar
manner to Vaerana and her companions, were beginning to assemble.

"I thought the Cult controlled Pros!" Fowler commented. "How'd you get so many
of Elversult's Maces into town?"

"The shark bounty; the fishing captains are desperate for crews," Vaerana
explained. "We snuck in a few at a time, pretending we wanted work."

Vaerana stood in her stirrups and twisted around to look at the quay behind her,
where Fowler's crew sat two to a horse. The amputees were seated before the two
strongest men and tied into their saddles with leather straps. They looked
rather frightened and weak, but they had heard what would befall them in the
Cult's hands and made no protest.

"Listen up, sailors!" Vaerana said. "Your horses know more about this than you
do, so don't start thinking you're smarter than they are. If you get in trouble,
just drop the reins and hold on to your saddles."

Arvold immediately released his reins. Though Tombor had already positioned
himself at the back of the group,
Ruha moved her own horse out of line and deftly backed him to the rear of the
line. If the sailmender had trouble,

she did not want to miss the chance to repay the debt she owed him.

Once the witch had changed positions, Vaerana pulled her mace and set the spurs
to her mount. Pierstar's horse reared, then bolted after the Lady Constable, and
in the next instant the entire line was thundering down the dock.

When Vaerana neared the shore, she gave a loud whoop. The entire company of
horsemen began to move, some blocking the alleys and others spurring their
mounts straight down the village's largest lane.

Ruha's mount left the quay. She saw several enemy arrows streak through the air
ahead of her; then she passed across the waterfront and followed the rest of the
column into a warren of narrow streets. As the company passed, the warriors
blocking the side streets fell in at the rear of the charge, and the witch soon
found herself caught in the midst of a herd of snorting, pounding horseflesh.

The company galloped inland past a dozen ramshackle inns, then came to an
intersection and turned westward.
One of Fowler's men panicked and jerked his mount's reins, demolishing a shanty
when the startled horse lost its footing and crashed through the hut's
weather-beaten walls. Ruha saw one ofVaerana's Maces

guiding his own mount into
the debris to help the tumbling sailor, then she was around the corner and
thundering down the muddy lane. A hundred yards ahead, the road passed through
the gateway of a timber stockade, then curved around a grassy hill and
disappeared from sight. A pair of Black Caps were trying to push the rough-hewn
gates closed, but a flurry of crossbow bolts suddenly sprang from the front of
the column to cut them down.

That was when a shower of flaming hail filled the air, followed by a flurry of
arrows that caught the company in a deadly cross fire from both sides of the
lane. Several men cried out, nearly falling from their saddles as fiery pellets
pierced their legs and shoulders and even their

chain-mailed torsos. Panicked, ringing whinnies echoed off the weatherworn
huts as tufts of black fletching suddenly sprouted in the flanks and withers
of galloping horses, and one of the beasts fell.

The rider went rolling head over heels down the street, coming to a rest before
an alley too narrow to be called a lane. It was simply a space between two
shanties. From this crevice shot a glimmering net of golden light, which quickly
settled over the stunned horseman before he could recover his wits and rise.

Ruha yanked on her reins, nearly knocking Tombor from his horse as she crossed
in front him. She guided her mount toward the lane, kicking its belly to urge it
onward. The beast realized instantly what she wanted.
The witch barely had time to raise herself in her stirrups before it leapt over
the fallen warrior and entered the cranny, its flanks brushing the wood on both
sides of the lane.

As Ruha expected, she found herself barreling down upon an astonished wizard
who, lacking the time to cast a spell, turned to hurl himself to the ground. The
witch spurred her mount forward. The horse caught the sorcerer square in the
back with both front hooves, snapping the man's spine with a sickening crack.

"I love horses!" Ruha cried, reining the beast to a stop.
"You are so much more cooperative than camels!"

The witch looked over her shoulder to see Vaerana's grim-jawed comrade,
Pierstar, staring down the alley as the fallen wizard's net dissolved around
him. The witch backed her mount down the lane toward the dazed warrior.

"Stand up, Pierstar!" she ordered.

The astonished warrior tossed off the remnants of the net and lurched to his
feet, stuttering his astonished thanks. Ruha emerged from

the alley to find a crescent of horsemen arrayed around her, firing their crossbows into the huts from which the shower of Black Cap arrows had erupted.

"That was a damned thoughtless thing to do!" snarled Vaerana Hawklyn, pulling Pierstar onto her own horse. "We go to all this trouble to fetch you, and what do you do? Put yourself at risk!"

With that, Vaerana jerked her horse toward the gate. Pierstar glanced over his shoulders and shrugged in apology. Ruha was so astonished that she could only stare after the Lady Constable.

"Go on, Witch." Tombor pointed his mace through the gateway. "And don't mind Vaerana's sharp tongue. She's just worried about Yanseldara."

"Who?"

"You'll find out soon enough." The cleric spurred his horse after Vaerana, waving at the witch to follow. "She's the reason you're here."

Ruha urged her horse after Tombor. A steady clatter of crossbows sounded behind her as, one after the other, the warriors fired their weapons, then turned to follow the rest of the company through the gate.

The terrain outside Pros was surprisingly clear. Other than a

few weed-choked
farm plots lying close to the village stockade, the vista was one of grassy,
rolling knolls, with a vast sapphire sky hanging so low it seemed they would
ride into it. The muddy road snaked its way up a broad, dry valley, meandering
back and forth around the base of the dome-shaped hills, gradually growing drier
and dustier as it climbed away from the Dragonmere.

At last, the road curled around a knoll and angled up the headwall of a small
dale. As the company approached the slope, the largest part of the column peeled
off and circled the hill, leaving the wounded and those riding double, save the
Lady Constable and Pierstar, to continue up the main route.

Ruha caught up to Captain Fowler, and together they followed Vaerana to the back
side of the knoll, where the warriors were dismounting and reloading their
crossbows. They dismounted and passed their reins to Tombor, who had been
assigned to stay with the horse holders

and ready his healing spells. Vaerana cast a wary glance in Ruha's direction,
but turned without comment and started up the slope. Fowler offered a helping
hand to the witch, and they began to climb.

During the ascent, they had to pause several times to rest the witch's throbbing
leg, giving them ample opportunity to study the road to

Elversult. After
cresting the dale's headwall, it struck out as straight as an arrow across a
broad expanse of flat, featureless tableland.
Already, the wounded riders and the sailors were a hundred yards across the
plain, but the distance before them seemed immeasurable, and the witch could see
that there were no knolls or ravines where the company of riders could hide
while it regrouped and tended to its wounded.

By the time Ruha and Fowler reached the summit, the
Maces had already fallen to their bellies and crawled to positions overlooking
the road below. Some of the men had wrapped small strips of oil-soaked cloth
around the heads of their crossbow bolts and were preparing small piles of
tinder to ignite with flint and steel. The witch made note of where the nearest
fire would be, then she and Fowler crawled to the crest of the hill and laid
down on either side of Vaerana.

"If we are setting an ambush, I have fire magic that will prove useful."

"I'd like to keep you secret, at least as much as possible." As Vaerana spoke,
she kept her hazel eyes fixed on the road. "Don't use your magic unless you're
certain of getting them all."

"I cannot be certain. It depends how many they send."

"It'll be a bunch," Fowler said. "That arrow squall at the gate was no accident.
They were waiting for us."

The suggestion drew an angry scowl from Vaerana.
She remained silent a long time, then reluctantly nodded. "I guess we weren't
as sneaky as I thought. The Cult was watching us."

"How'd they know you were there?" Fowler asked.

Vaerana shrugged. "Pros is a small town, and we hadn't planned to be there four
days. The Cult probably grew suspicious when they heard the innkeepers gossip
ing about all the strangers lolling about in their rooms."

"You are certain they do not have a spy among your men?" Ruha asked.

Vaerana frowned as though insulted. "Not among this bunch. Pierstar picked every
man himself." She glanced down the long line of warriors as though confirming to
herself that she was right. "Besides, I'm the only one who knew you were coming.
A spy couldn't have told them anything except that I was in town."

"When Pierstar fell, their wizard tried to capture him."
Ruha observed. "Perhaps they were curious about what you wanted in their
village."

"Not that curious," Vaerana retorted. "They've had a

thousand gold coins on my head for two years. Their assassins wouldn't pass up that price out of curiosity."

"Speaking of prices," Fowler said, "a thousand gold ought to cover what you owe me when we get to Elversuit."

"Owe you?" Vaerana narrowed her eyes and glared at the half-ore as though she were considering running a dagger up his belly. "Why do you think I owe you a thousand gold?"

"Because of my promise," Ruha explained. "I said the Harpers would buy him a new cog."

Vaerana's eyes bulged. "You what?" she gasped. "Why?"

"So he would attack the dragon," Ruha explained. "It was tearing another ship apart, and it was the only way to persuade him to risk the Storm Sprite."

The Lady Constable's mouth gaped open. "You can't... you don't have the..." She let the sentence trail off, then shook her head and cocked her brow. "Did Storm say you could do that kind of thing?"

"No," Ruha admitted.

"But it was a Harper's promise." Fowler turned out the

collar of his tunic, displaying the pin Ruha had given him. "And I've got
proof."

Vaerana stared at the silver harp and moon, shaking her head in disbelief. "You
gave him your pin?"

"The ship was a very big one," Ruha said. "If I had let the dragon sink it,
hundreds of lives would have been lost."

"If Captain Fowler was reluctant to attack the dragon, didn't you think it might
be too much for the Storm
Sprite to handle?"

Ruha shook her head. "Of course not—not with my magic."

A purple cloud settled over Vaerana's face. "Witch, I
don't know where we're going to get the money to pay for a new cog—but I can
tell you this much: it won't come from Elversult's treasury! Yanseldara would
never stand for that, not for Storm Silverhand herself!"

Ruha turned to Fowler with a guilty knot in her stomach. "I am so terribly
sorry. Captain. They told me that the Harpers always stand behind the word of—"

"What are you apologizing for?" Fowler interrupted.
"Didn't you hear her? Vaerana said we."

Ruha lifted her brow. "She did, did she not?" The witch looked back to Vaerana.

"And I was beginning to think you did not like me."

"I don't, but you are a Harper—at least until Storm Silverhand gets the bill for Fowler's new cog."

With that, Vaerana fell silent and looked back toward Pros, searching for the first sign of pursuit. The Black Caps were slow in coming, which Ruha took to be an omen both good and bad. On one hand, it suggested that the Maces' escape had taken the Cult by surprise, which would make it more difficult for them to pursue. At the same time, however, the delay also meant they were taking the time to organize themselves and gather a large force.

After a few minutes. Fowler grew impatient and started to rise. "What are we waiting for? Those Black

Caps had their fill of fighting in Pros. They're not coming."

Vaerana grabbed the half-ore's furry arm. "Don't be in such a hurry, Tusks. It's a long ride to Elversult."

"Then the sooner we get going, the sooner I get my gold."

"It's not that easy." Vaerana pulled Fowler back to the ground. "If we don't discourage our pursuers now, they won't hesitate to attack us on the open road. I'm afraid the Cult of the Dragon has grown bold since

Yanseldara's catalepsy."

"Catalepsy?" Fowler echoed. "Something's wrong with the Ruling Lady?"

The Lady Constable's mouth tightened, and she looked away. "Someone poisoned her. Yanseldara's fallen into some sort of trance, and we haven't been able to call her back. That's why I sent for the witch."

"But I am not a healer!" Ruha objected. "I know little of poisons and antidotes."

Vaerana glowered at her disdainfully. "I know what a witch is."

The Lady Constable did not have time to say more, for the valley below began to resound with pounding hooves.
She turned and nodded to the Maces who had wrapped oil-soaked cloths around the heads of their crossbow bolts. The warriors began to strike their flints, and within seconds several of them had ignited small piles of tinder. Faint wisps of white fume began to rise from the tiny fires, but Ruha did not think the smoke would be visible from the road, especially to someone on the back of a galloping horse.

The first riders appeared at the base of the hill, mounted on skinny horses with frothing mouths and lathered coats. The men were whipping

their haggard beasts
mercilessly, demanding speed that the neglected creatures could not possibly
provide.

Vaerana raised her hand, holding her warriors at bay while the column of Black
Caps wound its way around

the base of the knoll. The men with the oil darts touched the heads to the
small fires they had kindled, and long ribbons of black fume began to rise into
the air. Several
Cult warriors looked toward the summit of hill.

"Now!" Vaerana yelled.

As one, the entire company of Maces rose and aimed their crossbows at the road
below. A staccato chorus cracked over the valley, and the first third of the
Cult column hit the ground screaming. Blossoms of flickering orange flame
sprang to life on the opposite hill.

"Reload!"

Vaerana's warriors touched the heads of their empty crossbows to the ground,
then stuck their boots into the toe stirrups and began grunting and cursing as
they pulled the stiff bowstrings back to the lock plates. On the road below, the
anguished wails and cries for help went unanswered as the

uninjured Cult warriors galloped forward, trampling their wounded fellows in a desperate effort to round the corner before the Maces loosed another volley. The fires on the opposite hill began to spread, creating an impenetrable wall of flame and filling the valley with a choking pall of smoke.

Vaerana waited until the leading riders had cleared the tangle of wounded, then called, "Squad the First!"

Half the Maces loosed their bolts, again aiming at the front of the Cult column. More men screamed and fell, lengthening the obstacle course for those behind and adding to the confusion. While the first squad reloaded, the rest of the Elversult warriors turned their aim farther back, where the enemy horsemen continued to round the corner.

Vaerana waited until the first group of men had reloaded, then called, "Squad the Second!"

The second half of the company fired, downing a dozen horses and men. More riders galloped around the bend, either leaping their fallen comrades or stumbling over them, and a few alert Cult members turned their terrified horses up the hill.

Vaerana waited until the assault had almost reached the top, allowing the second squad time to reload, then called, "All fire!"

The Cult horsemen rode into a wall of black shafts that unhorsed all but three of them. The survivors brought their mounts up short, took one look at the gang of warriors reaching for their maces, then spun their mounts around and charged down the slope.

That was all it took to break the enemy's morale. When the rest of the Cult riders rounded the corner and heard their wailing comrades, then saw three of their fellows coming down the hill at a breakneck gallop, they quickly concluded that the situation was hopeless. The entire column turned back, beating their horses as savagely as when they rode into battle.

"That'll keep 'em off our backs." Vaerana turned away from the bloody scene below and pointed at five men.
"You men hang back and keep a sharp eye. I doubt the Black Caps will find their courage again, but let me know if they do. The rest of you, to your horses. We've a long ride before we're safe again."

Fowler started to take Ruha's arm to help her down the hill, but Vaerana moved between them and took his place.

"You go on ahead, Tusks," Vaerana said, slipping Ruha's arm over her shoulders. "I'll help the witch."

Fowler raised his heavy brow, then shrugged and began to pick his way down the hill. The Lady Constable let him get a little way ahead, then started to help Ruha down the slope.

"Now, about this absurd promise you made—"

"Which promise?" Ruha interrupted. "The one wherein I swore to combat villainy and wickedness, or the one wherein I swore to help those in fear for their lives?"

Vaerana stopped walking and narrowed her eyes. "Don't you quote watchwords to me! I've heard about you, and I won't stand for such trouble—not in Elversult, and not when so much depends on you!"

Ruha lowered her gaze. "Forgive me." Had everyone in the Heartlands heard of the
Voonlar debacle? "I did not mean to anger you, but what would you have done? The
dragon was tearing the ship apart, and Captain Fowler would not go to her aid.
Hundreds of people would have drowned."

Vaerana started down the hill again. "A tough choice,
I'll grant you. But defending others doesn't mean throwing your own life away,
not when people are counting on you someplace else."

"I would not have attacked if I thought the wyrm was going to kill me," Ruha
remarked. "Nor would I have asked Captain Fowler to risk his ship if I thought
the creature would sink it."

Vaerana shook her head in incredulity. "Well, what'd you expect? Did you think
you'd kill it?"

"Of course."

Vaerana stumbled and nearly sent them both tumbling.

Ruha hissed as she caught her weight on her injured leg, then explained, "I have
killed three other dragons, in the desert. And I would have killed this one, had
it not already been dead."

"Dead?"

"It was like a ghoul." As they continued their descent, Ruha explained how Captain Fowler's crew had harpooned the beast, and how it come back to attack after her spell had destroyed its internal organs. "Then it sprayed a black cloud over the bow, and the entire front half of the ship dissolved."

Vaerana's shoulders suddenly grew tense beneath Ruha's arm, and her florid complexion turned as pale as ivory. "You'd better describe this dragon to me, Witch."

"As you command. First of all, it was huge, perhaps as large as the Storm Sprite herself. It was very black, with dull and withered scales and many fleshless places on its—"

"Cypress!" Vaerana hissed.

"Cypress?"

"He came up from the Wetwoods to attack the caravans around Elversult," the Lady Constable explained. "But that was three years ago, and Yanseldara said she killed him."

"If this is the same dragon, perhaps she did," Ruha said. "He looked very dead

when he attacked us."

This did not seem to calm Vaerana at all. "Then Cypress is the Cult of the Dragon's idol! No wonder they're being so bold!" She swept Ruha up and started down the hill at a trot. "We've got to hurry!"

The witch wrapped her fingers into Vaerana's cloak, terrified the Lady Constable would trip and fall on top of her. "Wait! I do not understand!"

"The Cult of the Dragon worships dead dragons," Vaerana continued to run. "The reverence keeps the spirits from being drawn into the netherworld, and the dragons just keep growing."

"Please put me down!" Ruha urged. "There is no reason to worry. I have destroyed Cypress."

Vaerana began to slow, but did not return the witch's feet to the ground. "You what?"

"I blasted him apart," Ruha confirmed. "With lamp oil and magic. From the inside. The detonation ripped him apart."

Vaerana's face remained blank and uncomprehending. "You destroyed him?" she gasped. "You're sure?"

"The explosion annihilated his body, along with the stern of Captain Fowler's

ship," Ruha confirmed. "I saw the sharks eating pieces of his body. The same
thing would have happened to us if Minister Hsieh had not come back."

Vaerana's jaw fell. "Minister who?"

"Hsieh," Ruha said. "It was his ship we saved. He is a
Shou mandarin—"

"I know who he is!" Vaerana finally stopped and returned Ruha to the ground.
They were near the bottom of the hill, less than twenty paces from the horses,
but

the Lady Constable did not resume walking. "I don't know whether to kiss you
or gut you!"

"I would prefer you do neither," Ruha replied. "Instead, please explain why you
are so upset."

"I think Hsieh is our enemy":

"Of course. The Shou are very fond of dragons."

Vaerana shook her head. "I'm not talking about their emperor—that's something
else altogether." The Lady
Constable lowered her voice. "My sages think someone's trying to steal
Yanseldara's spirit."

"Ah." Ruha was beginning to understand why Vaerana thought a witch might help her friend. "Why do they think that?"

"Someone has stolen a staff her father gave her—"

"It is very dear to her?" Ruha was no master of spirit magic, but she had learned something of the subject from Qoha'dar, an old witch with whom she had been exiled as a child. "Perhaps the staff is even her most treasured possession?"

Vaerana nodded, and lowered her voice even further. "And by all accounts, Prince Tang's mother is a master of the art."

"But why are the Shou doing this terrible thing?" Ruha asked. "What do they want with Yanseldara's spirit?"

Vaerana bit her lip, then looked away. "It's my doing. They trade in poisons and fixings for dark magic. I've threatened to chase them out of Elversult if they don't stop. I guess stealing Yanseldara's spirit is their way of calling my bluff."

With that, Vaerana snaked an arm around Ruha and started toward the horses, half-dragging the witch along. "If we don't want this turning into another of your debacles, we'll need to ride like the wind!"

The reference to Voonlar stung like a slap, but that was not

the reason Ruha pulled free of Vaerana and stopped. The witch had only a passing familiarity with spirit magic; it would not be enough to save Yanseldara.

Vaerana did not seem to realize that her companion had stopped until she reached the horses and took her reins from Tombor.

"Well?"

"I cannot save Yanseldara." The words came so difficultly that Ruha could barely utter them. "You must send for someone else."

Vaerana's face darkened. "Out of the question! I'd do this myself if I could, but the Shou know me." She grabbed the reins of Ruha's mount; then led it, along with her own horse, toward the witch. "As pitiful an excuse for a Harper as you are, you're the only one who can save Yanseldara—which means you're all that stands between Elversult and the tyranny of the Cult of the Dragon."

Vaerana thrust a set of reins into the witch's hands.

"But, Lady Constable—"

"Don't 'but' me, Witch!" Vaerana roared. "You're supposed to be a Harper, and a Harper goes where she's called. Besides, all you've got to

do is sneak into
the Ginger Palace and find Yanseldara's staff. Even you can handle that!"

"You do not want me to lift the curse?"

Vaerana rolled her eyes. "Why would I think you can do what Thunderhand
Frostbryn could not? All I need is someone the Shou don't know—but you almost
botched that up, didn't you? Now, I'll have to do some fast riding if we don't
want that mandarin recognizing you."

The Lady Constable thrust her foot into a stirrup, then turned toward the rest
of the riders. "Tombor!"

Tombor, who could hardly have missed the last part of Vaerana's outburst, led his own horse forward. "Yes, m'lady?"

Vaerana flipped her hand in Ruha's direction. "Take the witch back to Elversult.
After you tend to the seriously wounded, I don't imagine you'll have any
healing magic left, but do what you can for her leg. Then see that she's given
an introduction to the Ginger Palace, like we
planned."

Tombor's twinkle-eyed gaze darted to Ruha, then back

to Vaerana. "And what will you and the rest of the Maces be doing, Lady
Constable?"

"Inspecting a caravan," Vaerana replied. "A Shou caravan."

Six

The journey to Elversult took the rest of the day and most of the next, so that they reached the outskirts of town in late afternoon. Suggesting it might be wise not to be seen together in the city, Tombor pointed out a wooded hill where Ruha and Fowler could wait while he saw to the wounded. Grateful for any chance to rest their sore rumps, the pair climbed out of their saddles and led their horses into the copse.

The captain fetched some water from a nearby stream so the witch could tend her shark bite; then they settled in to wait, too weary to talk or do anything but listen to the distant creak of passing wagons.

Twilight came, and worried that Tombor would not be able to find them in the dusky wood, Ruha asked the captain to collect some sticks while she gathered some dry moss off the forest floor. She was about to strike the fire when the portly cleric emerged from the shadows, appearing so suddenly and silently that he startled Fowler and made him drop an armload of branches he had collected.

"For a big man, you move mighty quiet." Fowler eyed a small wooden coffer that
Tombor was carrying in both hands. "Especially considering that your arms are
full."

A sour smile flashed across the cleric's lips and disappeared instantly, then
he chuckled merrily. "Sorry;

sometimes I can't resist. It's a gift of the gods."

"Which one?" Ruha asked. "Most priests invoke their gods often, but I have yet
to hear you utter the name of yours."

Tombor set the coffer on the ground at her feet. "My god is not so vain as the
others, but his healing magic is as strong as that of most—as you'll soon see."
He removed a small bundle of cloth from his pocket, then turned to
Fowler and motioned at the dry moss Ruha had gathered. "Would you be good
enough to start a small fire?"

Ruha passed her tinderbox to the captain, then watched as Tombor unwrapped his
bundle. Inside was a dark, sour-smelling balm that seemed to undulate like
water. The cleric dipped his fingers into the salve, and the

witch pulled her aba up to display her wound. After the long ride from Pros, it had started to open again. The edges were red and inflamed, while a steady flow of clear liquid oozed from the laceration itself.

Tombor rubbed his salve over the injury, and Ruha's leg seemed to disappear beneath a rippling shadow. The ointment felt as light as air; there was no greasy feeling or any burning sensation, only a slight, soothing coolness upon her skin, similar to what it felt like to step out of the hot sun into the shade of a large tree.

Once Tombor had smeared the balm over the entire wound, he tossed aside what remained. "It's my best salve, but I have to mix each batch fresh. It doesn't keep more than an hour." Tombor placed the coffer he had brought next to Fowler's fire, then said, "We'll let the balm do its work while I explain what I brought."

He opened the lid, revealing what looked to be several hundred pieces of gold stamped with the proud raven of the Kingdom of Sembia. Ruha had lived in the Heartlands long enough to know that the coins were accepted as currency throughout the region, for Sembite merchants controlled much of the area's trade.

"And the Lady Constable said she couldn't buy me a new cog!" Fowler snorted.

"She couldn't—at least not with this gold." Tombor reached deep into the chest
and removed a coin, then used his knife to scratch it and reveal the dull gray
sheen of lead. "The coins on top are real. The rest are fakes Vaerana took from a local thief. Don't try to buy anything with them, but they
should serve to convince the Shou you're a legitimate spice buyer."

"That's to be the witch's disguise?" Fowler asked.
"It's the only way we can get her into the Ginger
Palace." He turned back to Ruha. "Tomorrow morning, you'll meet a local merchant
we've hired to present you to the Shou. He's a useful tool, but an unreliable
one, so don't tell him anything about your mission."

"Our mission," Fowler said. "I'm going with her."
Ruha lifted her brow. "Thank you, Captain, but—"
Fowler raised his hands to silence her. "You don't have any choice. Witch. I'm
not letting you out of my sight until I get my new cog. Besides, if you don't
have a bodyguard, the Shou are liable to think you aren't very important."

Ruha looked to Tombor, who nodded. "It's a good idea."
He reached into his pocket to remove a gold coin. It was as large as Ruha's
palm, and embossed with the image of a camel and several

strange letters. "Make certain that Princess Wei Dao sees this. She has a love of coins from far lands, and this one comes all the way from Calimshan."

"May I offer it to her as a gift?" Ruha asked, reaching for the gold piece. "Perhaps I can make a friend—"

Tombor shook his head, pulling the coin out of her reach. "It's better to let her find it on her own." He tossed the coin into the coffer. "Just make certain she sees it, and she'll think there are more treasures like it deeper in the chest. Her imagination will do more to win you a night in the Ginger Palace than any gift."

"And once we're inside, what then?" asked Fowler.
"You'll only have a day or so to find Yanseldara's staff and get out," Tombor answered. "Vaerana will do her best

to stall Hsieh's caravan, but she won't be able to hold it up long without starting a war."

"What does the staff look like?" Ruha asked. "And do you have any suggestions as to where I might find it?"

"The staff isn't much to look at—it's a plain rod of oak—but there's a huge topaz on top. None of us has any idea where you should

look. The Shou are a
secretive people, especially about their homes. All I can tell you is that
Tang's mother, Lady Feng, is reportedly a master of spirit magic."

Tombor glanced down at Ruha's leg, where the dark balm had stopped rippling and
now looked like nothing more than a strange shadow with no source.

"The salve's done its work," the cleric said. "Turn your leg toward the
firelight."

Ruha did as instructed. When the flickering yellow light fell on her thigh, the
balm rose off her leg like dark steam. The shark bite had closed completely,
leaving only a thin curved line and slight red sheen to mark where the wound had
been.

"That is a most marvelous balm." Ruha looked from her wound to Tombor's heavy,
jowled face. "You must tell me which god to thank!"

Pretending not to hear Ruha's request, the cleric closed the coffer lid and
stood. "With that chest among your things, you'll need a safe place to spend the
night.
I'd recommend the Axe and Hammer. Anyone in the city will tell you how to get
there."

"What about our guide?" Fowler asked.

"He'll meet you on the way," Tombor replied. "Just start down Snake Road."

"How will we recognize him?" Ruha asked.

"Don't worry about that; he'll find you." Tombor stepped away from the fire,
slipping into the dusky shadows as quietly as he had appeared. "Abazm always
knows who's on the road to the Ginger Palace."

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Save for an impression of impregnable reclusion, the
Ginger Palace had little in common with those hulking stacks of stone Heartland
lords called home. Instead of the squalid green waters of a moat, the Shou
citadel was surrounded by the soldierly ranks of a ginkgo forest, and sat not
upon some windswept crag, but upon a square mound of pounded earth. The walls of
its outer curtain were plastered smooth and painted white as alabaster, and they
were capped along the entire length by a peaked roof of scarlet tiles. At every
corner stood a tower with five stacked balconies, each one covered by a scar
let-tiled roof with upswept eaves. Inside the fortress, several buildings rose
high enough above the outer curtain to display the same roof styling, lending an
aura of harmony and supreme order to the entire edifice.

"I still don't like this," hissed Fowler. He was walking beside Ruha as they
followed their guide, Abazm, down a white-bricked avenue toward the palace
gates. The captain was dressed in a brown aba the witch had made for him the
night before, and in his arms he bore the small wooden coffer Tombor had loaned
them. "No one's going to believe we're spice buyers—not in these outfits!"

"If you do not like my plan, Captain, you may withdraw," Ruha whispered. She
stopped and held out her hands. "There is still time."

Fowler clutched the box more tightly to his chest. "And let you out of my sight?
When I've a new cog, and not a minute before."

Abazm, a greasy-haired dwarf dressed in a striped burnoose, whirled about in
midstride.

"What is all this whispering, Master and Mistress?" He was surprisingly thin
compared to most dwarves, with bushy eyebrows as black as kohl, a hawkish nose,
and the stubble of a dark, coarse beard. "It is most unbecoming. The Shou will
think you do not trust me."

"We don't," growled Fowler. "Keep walking."

Abazm glanced toward the palace and remained where he was. "If the Shou believe

you have no trust for me,

they will have no trust for you."

The dwarf's gaze dropped to the coffer in Fowler's hands, lingering there just long enough to send a shiver down Ruha's spine. After joining them on the road, he had insisted on seeing their funds before he risked his own reputation by introducing them to the Shou, Though Ruha had been careful not to let him reach into the chest, Abazm had raised an eyebrow when he saw the Sembite coins. He had offered to check them for purity, remarking that a well-placed friend had told him a local thief was counterfeiting Sembite coins. The witch had curtly ordered Fowler to shut the chest, pretending to be suspicious of both the guide's story and his motives.

"It is not necessary that the Shou trust us," Ruha said. "It is only necessary that they like the color of our gold."

"Of course, I cannot judge that without a closer inspection." The dwarfs eyes flicked to the coffer and remained there, as though he expected Ruha to open the chest again.

"They'll like it well enough." Fowler bared his tusks at the little merchant. "Now walk."

Abazm sighed heavily, then continued down the whitepaved avenue. Fowler let
the dwarf get a little way ahead, then turned to Ruha.

"I don't like that little fellow, any more than I like this plan of yours," the
captain commented. "I'm sure Vaerana wanted us to say we're from Sembia, like
most spice merchants. We'd draw less notice than claiming we come from
Anauroch."

"I do not care what Vaerana wanted." Ruha stepped to the captain's side and kept
pace with him. "I am not from
Sembia. How can I pretend to be from someplace I have visited only twice?"

"I've been there plenty of times."

"But you are not the spy," Ruha whispered. "And I have learned better than to
pretend I am someone I am not.
That is what caused the trouble at Voonlar. If I claim I
am from Anauroch, there is no need to explain my igno-

rance of Heartlands customs."

"And what about me?" Fowler grumbled. "I know less about deserts than you do
about ships. At least you've sunk a ship."

Ruha reached over and straightened the checkered keffiyeh covering Fowler's
head and neck. "Just look strong and mean. That's all that is

expected ofBedine
men."

They reached the end of the avenue, where their guide stood waiting. Abazm clambered up a broad set of marble stairs to a tile-roofed portico of simple post and beam construction. The lintel had a pair of elaborate, longtailed peacocks engraved along its length, while the beam ends resting atop it had been fashioned into stylized dragon heads. On the far side of the porch hung a pair of glossy, red-lacquered gates decorated with the yellow figures of rearing basilisk lizards. Next to each gate stood a Shou sentry armored in a conical brass helmet and a red silk hauberk imprinted with the tessellated pattern of its plate scale lining. Each guard held a long, curve-bladed polearm, the butt resting on the floor between his feet and the shaft rising vertically in front of him. Both men kept their slanted eyes fixed straight ahead, as though they did not even see the three strangers approaching.

Abazm strode straight between the two men and tugged on an ornate yellow pull cord. A muffled gong reverberated through the gates, then a small viewing portal swung open above the dwarf's head. A scowling Shou official peered down his long nose at the merchant.

"We do not expect you, Abazm."

Abazm clasped his hands and bowed so low that, had he worn a proper dwarven
beard, it would have scraped the floor. "I have brought merchants from the
distant sands of Anauroch, Honored One." Without standing, he waved a hand at
the coffer Fowler held. "They wish to have commerce with the Ginger Palace."

The Honored One's gaze flicked over the coffer, then back to Abazm. The dwarf
stepped closer to the viewing

portal, drawing a silver coin from his sleeve and deftly displaying it between
his cupped hands, where the two sentries could not see it.

"I ask Prince if he wishes to see you."

A sharp clunk reverberated through the gates, then one gate swung open. Abazm
-led the way inside, slipping his coin to the Honored One so smoothly that Ruha
did not see it change hands. Inside, a path of white marble led across a huge,
yellow-bricked courtyard to a doubletiered mansion. The building was of the
same post and beam construction as the portico, save that the spaces between the
posts were filled with white-plastered walls, silvery windows of rare and
expensive glass, or redlacquered doors decorated with yellow basilisk emblems.
The pillars and lintels were carved with a great variety of stylized creatures:

birds with tails of flame, tiger-faced jackals, furry imps with long curling
tails, and a hundred more. The building's two roofs, as the witch had seen from
outside, were covered with scarlet tiles and swept up at the eaves. Every detail
was arranged in perfect symmetry and balance, carefully contrived to impart upon
the onlooker a complete sense of serenity and consonance, as though to imply
that the master of the palace could control even the wildest whim of nature.

Ruha started to follow the Honored One across the courtyard, but suddenly found
her path blocked by six guards who had apparently stepped out of nowhere. They
were armed and armored as those outside, save that their emotionless gazes were
locked on the witch's face.

Abazm took Ruha's sleeve and gently pulled her back.
"Please, Mistress, we have not been invited into the palace."

He pulled the witch toward a pillared gallery that ran along the inner perimeter
of the curtain wall, where a long line of stone benches had been provided for
the comfort of those waiting to visit palace residents. Ruha counted more than
thirty merchants gathered on the seats. Many wore the billowing tunics and
outlandish

hats of Sembite merchants, but there were also dwarves in striped burnooses,

elves outfitted in their customary leather and green, even a pair ofbare-chested ores dressed in silken knickers and garish stockings. No matter what their costume, they were all holding a coffer similar to the one in Fowler's hands.

Ruha's heart fell. Abazm had gotten them inside the Ginger Palace as promised, but it was going to be a long time before she could begin her search.

A few of the merchants called greetings to the dwarf. Abazm returned each salutation with artificial warmth and politely introduced his companions as Ruha and Fowal'sid of the Mtair Dhafir. Without exception, the dwarf went on to explain that his clients were incense traders from Anauroch, and then suggested a meeting in his shop—no doubt with an eye toward earning a commission if anything came of the arrangement. With each introduction, the witch silently cursed Abazm's efficacy, but she forced herself to offer salutations and respond enthusiastically to her guide's efforts. Before she finally reached a vacant bench at the end of the line, Ruha had made three appointments for two days hence—by which time she hoped to have returned the stolen staff to Yanseldara and be well on her way back to Storm Silverhand's farm in Shadowdale.

Fowler remained strangely silent the whole time, preferring to stand behind
Ruha with his gaze fixed firmly on the ground. As the witch took her seat, he
leaned close to her ear.

"I told you this plan was a foolish one. I've carried cargo for half a dozen of
these fellows."

Ruha looked back down the line and saw that several merchants were, indeed,
staring in their direction. "Then sit down and do not look so suspicious. I am
sure you are not the only half-ore they have ever seen. With luck, they will
find it difficult to toll you from the others."

Fowler scowled as though insulted, but sat down with the coffer in his lap and
pulled his keffiyeh down his

brow. Ruha settled in beside him, and Abazm clambered onto the bench next to
her.

"Not to worry," the dwarf whispered. "I am a favorite of the Princess Wei Dao.
She will see that we do not wait more than three or four hours."

"Four hours?" Ruha gasped. That was half the day, and from what Tombor had said,
Vaerana would be able to delay Hsieh's arrival little more than a day. "Is there

no faster way?"

Abazm's bushy eyebrows came together in an exaggerated expression of hurt.
"That is fast." He gestured to the long line of merchants. "Of late, Prince Tang
has been slow about his business. Some of these men have been waiting three days
already!"

Ruha glanced at Fowler and caught him sneering as though he were going to speak.
"Say nothing, Fowal'sid.
At least we are inside."

"Of course we are. Is that not what I promised?"
Abazm cocked an eyebrow and gazed thoughtfully at
Ruha. "But if that is all you wished, there was no need to hire me—as I am sure
your friends told you."

"They said you could arrange a quick audience."

Ruha looked toward the rear of the courtyard, deciding to use the time to
familiarize herself with the palace's layout. She could see only the front part
of the compound. The back half was sealed off by a pair of winglike ramparts
that spread outward from the midpoint of the mansion, where it changed to a two
story structure, to meet the walls of the outer curtain. Above these parti
tions showed the tiled roofs of two huge, single storey buildings located near
the back of the compound.

In the front courtyard, where Ruha and the other merchants sat waiting, a narrow, L-shaped building stood in the southeastern corner of the enclosure. The witch concluded that this was the sentry barracks, for a steady flow of guards passed through the doors in both directions. A similar building sat in the opposite corner of the courtyard. Save for the two guards posted outside its

doors, this structure seemed deserted.

The witch had barely finished her study before the Honored One emerged from the mansion at the head of a small procession of guards. He led the troop across the courtyard toward Ruha and her companions, drawing an astonished murmur from the pillared gallery. Abazm frowned in puzzlement, but pushed himself off the bench and turned to his clients.

"It is better than I hoped," he declared. "We will not be required to wait at all."

Fowler looked far from relieved at this news. "Why all those guards?"

Abazm shook his head, bewildered. "Because of you two, perhaps. The Shou are not fond of half-men, and they are bound to be suspicious of women who cover their faces."

The procession stopped before them; then the Honored One bowed to Abazm. "Princess Wei Dao asks you into audience hall."

The dwarf cast a smug look over his shoulder and returned the bow, as did the witch and the captain. The Honored One turned toward the mansion, and the guards closed around Ruha's small company without showing a flicker of suspicion or anxiety. The witch found it strange that, if the Shou were suspicious other and Fowler, they did not bother to take herjambiya or the captain's sword.

The Honored One led the procession up a marble staircase and through an open doorway at the far end of the mansion. They passed through a high-ceilinged anteroom so quickly that Ruha barely noticed the stylized frescoes, then entered a long, spacious room hung with silk tapestries and floored with the mosaic of a beautiful, flametailed crane.

In a teak throne at the far end of the room sat a striking Shou woman in a tight, ankle-length dress embroidered with a golden dragon almost as sinuous as she.
Arrayed around her were a dozen women and half as many men, all watching in expectant silence as Abazm

boldly led his clients forward. As the trio drew nearer,

Ruha saw that the princess was a woman who believed even more firmly than the
Bedine in the power of cosmetics. Her painted lips were as glossy and red as
the palace's lacquered gates, her eyelids were sapphire blue, and, save for the
rouge highlights beneath her round cheekbones, her face was powdered as white as
alabaster.
Only a yellow scarf carefully tied around her throat seemed at all out of place,
bunched up as it was around the dress's high collar.

The Honored One stopped before the throne and bowed, then flourished his hand at
Abazm. "The dwarf
Abazm, Princess."

Abazm stopped before Wei Dao's throne and kneeled on the floor, then leaned
forward and pressed his forehead to the wood. Ruha cast a questioning glance
at
Fowler, who scowled at the dwarf's gesture and merely bowed. She did likewise,
hoping they were not inadvertently insulting their hostess.

If they were, it was impossible to tell. The princess glared at the back
ofAbazm's skull as though she wanted to stare a hole through it. The Honored One
slipped away from the dwarf, and no one took any notice whatsoever of
Ruha or Fowler.

At last, Abazm could no longer stand the silence. The dwarf

cautiously allowed
his gaze to creep across the floor to the princess's feet. "Princess Wei Dao,
you honor me with your radiance."

"Abazm, how surprising that you return so soon to
Ginger Palace." The princess fingered the scarf at her neck. "And how
fortunate."

Abazm raised himself so that he was merely kneeling before Wei Dao. "I am your
servant, and the servant of the Ginger Palace as well." He twisted around to
gesture at his clients, and Ruha glimpsed a bewildered gleam in the dwarf's
eyes. "I have brought traders from a distant land—"

"No! No more foreign powders!" Wei Dao ripped the

scarf from her throat, exposing an ugly swath of partially healed skin
eruptions. "See effects of your pearl dust?"

Abazm gasped at the sight of the princess's ravaged complexion. Incoherent,
half-voiced explanations regarding Lheshaylian sorcerers began to pour from
his mouth, and he looked to the Honored One for help. The Shou fixed his gaze on
Princess Wei Dao and pretended not to
notice.

"You say, skin shine like moon!" Wei Dao waved a hand toward the sky, gesturing
so angrily that the effort carried her to her feet. "Skin shine

like harvest
moon, craters and all!"

Abazm leapt up, but before he could turn to run, two guards caught him by the
arms. They lifted the dwarf into the air and held him before the princess, his
feet dangling six inches above the floor.

"I b-b-beg your forgiveness!" the dwarf cried. "I did not know this would
happen! I made my own wife try the powder before I sold it to you!"

"You give me same powder as dwarf woman?" Wei Dao snarled.

"Only to see if it was safe, Princess!"

The princess's eyes narrowed. "Liar—it is not safe!"
She tied her scarf around her throat and nodded to the guards. "Take deceitful
dwarf to tanning vats."

Ruha cringed at the punishment. It was unlikely that the tubs would be deep
enough to drown Abazm but, unless the Shou tanned leather differently than the
Bedine, the vats would be filled with harsh fluids and the foulest offal
gathered from the pens of dogs and swine.
The witch knew better than to think she could intercede on the dwarf's behalf,
but she would not leave him behind after she recovered Yanseldara's staff.

As the guards carried him out the door, Abazm jerked one arm free and swung around to face the throne. He glanced briefly at the witch and Fowler, then yelled,
"Wait! Spare me. Princess, and I will tell you something you should know!"

Ruha's stomach grew as heavy as lead. Fowler gnashed his tusks; then the Honored One's panicked voice echoed across the chamber. "Take him away!"

The guard recaptured Abazm's arm and turned to obey.

"Wait." The princess leaned forward in her throne, peering past Ruha and Fowler to the dwarf. "Say what I should know, Abazm. Then I decide whether to spare you."

The Honored One stepped forward, positioning himself squarely in front of Wei Dao. "Frightened dwarf say aanything, Princess. We cannot b-believe him."

There was a catch in the Shou's voice—and Ruha thought she knew why. "But you can believe us." The witch bowed to the princess, tugging on Fowler's sleeve so he would do the same. "We have no reason to lie."

Wei Dao studied the witch and her companion, then asked, "You know what insidious dwarf says?"

Ruha turned to face Abazm, trying to decide whether it would be wiser to expose
the chamberlain's corruption herself, or to restrain herself and hope the
treacherous dwarf realized that his best interests now lay in working with her.

"Do you know what dwarf says?" the princess demanded.

Ruha fixed her gaze on Abazm and let her hand drift toward herjambiya. Without
turning around, she said, "I
think I do, yes."

Abazm swallowed hard, then looked away from Ruha.
"Most Merciful Princess," the dwarf began. He glanced at the witch's hand, then
continued, "Most Compassionate
Lady, I beg leave to report that it is necessary to pay your trusted chamberlain
in order to secure appointments within the Ginger Palace."

Ruha sighed behind her veil. She turned to face the princess, fully expecting to
be called upon to confirm
Abazm's story.

The chamberlain was already kneeling before Wei

Dao's throne, his brow pressed to the floor and his arms stretched out before
him. "Compassionate Princess, I beg mercy for my family."

Wei Dao raised her thinly plucked eyebrows. "Then you

acknowledge this crime,
Chuang?"

"I do. My pockets hang heavy with silver." Chuang's muffled voice was barely
audible. "It is way of this land, and I am weak. At first, I am surprised and
grateful when visitors pay me silver. But soon it is expected, and I
do not open gates until—"

"Enough. You do not lie to me, and I grant mercy to your family." Wei Dao stared
at the prone chamberlain until his body began to tremble and great, racking sobs
reverberated across the floor. "But you dishonor your ancestors before Mandarins
of Heaven, and it is beyond me to ask that they make you welcome."

"Yes, Princess. I know."

Wei Dao looked up, then turned to a squat, flatcheeked man with an unwavering
scowl and granite eyes.
"Please, General Fui."

Before Ruha realized quite what was happening, the general had drawn a heavy,
square-tipped sword from one of the guard's scabbards and stepped to Chuang's
side. There was a sharp, wet thunk, and the witch saw just how swiftly and
surely death would come if the Shou found her out.

The general cleaned the blade on the headless

chamberlain's silken robe, then returned the weapon to its owner and stepped back to his place. His face remained as impassive as ever.

Wei Dao studied the chamberlain's disembodied head for a moment, then seemed to remember herself and looked toward the chamber entrance.

"Perfidious dwarf is permitted to leave."

The guards set Abazm down. As soon as the merchant's feet touched the floor, he spun on his heel and bowed very low.

"Your wisdom is more boundless than the sky,

Princess!" As he spoke, he was backing out the door. "Only Eldath herself is more merciful and forgiving!"

Wei Dao accepted the tribute with a faintly amused smirk. "You always welcome at Ginger Palace, Abazm. Please to call when berry lip paint is ready."

Once the dwarf was gone, Wei Dao rose and, stepping around the pool of blood at the base other throne, led her entire entourage across the floor to Ruha and Fowler. She circled them slowly, running her gaze over their robes and studying the witch's veil especially closely, then stopped in front of them.

Ruha was astounded that Wei Dao's guards would allow their mistress to approach so closely to two armed strangers, a fact that suggested they believed the princess to be perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

"Abazm says you come to do business with Ginger Palace?"

"Aye, with Prince Tang," Fowler confirmed.

Wei Dao's eyes hardened. "Prince Tang is no longer receiving today. Perhaps you come back tomorrow."

"We're wanting a large cargo, and we're ready to pay now."

"Tomorrow."

The princess stepped away without turning her back on her visitors and paid no attention to the coffer in Fowler's hands, even when he shook it to clank the heavy load of coins inside.

Ruha laid a restraining hand on the captain's arm. "That is enough, Fowal'sid."

The half-ore scowled, but held the coffer steady, and Wei Dao stopped short of turning to leave.

"We have come to sell as well as buy, Princess," Ruha said. "And you will be more interested in our wares than your husband."

Out of the corner other eye, Ruha caught Fowler frowning at

her unexpected
improvisation. She ignored him and lowered a hand to the pocket other aba,
asking,
"If I may, Princess?"

Wei Dao nodded, but Fowler, who had seen her draw spell components from those
same pockets, cleared his throat.

"Maybe now's not the time—"

Ruha whirled sharply on the burly half-ore. "Did I not tell you to be silent,
Fowal'sid?"

Fowler's leathery lip trembled with the impulse to curl into a snarl, but the
half-ore forced himself to lower his gaze and nod respectfully. "You did, Lady."

When the witch looked back to their hostess, she noticed a glimmer of respect in
Wei Dao's otherwise inexpressive face. Deciding that she had read the
princess's character correctly, Ruha reached into a pocket and withdrew two
milky tears of hardened tree resin.

"Have you heard of frankincense or myrrh?"

Wei Dao examined the droplets closely. "Are they gems?"

"In a manner of speaking, for they are more valuable than gold. If you can have

someone fetch a brazier and afill it with coals, I will show you."
| "Magic is forbidden in my presence."
| "This is not magic." Ruha found it interesting that the jshou considered
sorcery a greater threat to the safety of
Etheir nobility than they did blades. "The drops will produce a pleasant
smoke, nothing more."

Wei Dao nodded to two men, who promptly left through a door in the rear of the
chamber. Fowler continued to stare at the white tears so tensely that Ruha
feared he would alarm Wei Dao. The witch stepped closer to her hostess, until
their shoulders were almost touching.

"While we await the brazier, I will tell you more about these wondrous tears."
Ruha raised her hand, displaying the milky drops before Wei Dao's eyes. "They
are resins, scraped from beneath the bark of certain trees that grow only on the
eastern side of the highest mountains in
Anauroch."

"The great desert?" Wei Dao asked.

"Yes. There, we use frankincense and myrrh to scent

the air around stagnant oases. The tears can also be pressed to create
perfumes, or mixed with almond oil to create restorative tonics and soothing

lotions, or stirred into elixirs to ease the pains of childbirth." Ruha paused
to see if this elicited any interest from the princess.
When it did not, she continued, "They are also good for soothing stinging eyes,
earaches—even as a remedy to the bites of certain venomous insects, and as an
antidote to some kinds of poison."

Again, Ruha watched closely to see if the last item of her description drew any
special notice from the princess.
But if Wei Dao had any interest in poisons, it remained concealed with the rest
of her thoughts.

"Is there anything frankincense and myrrh cannot do?" Wei Dao's voice was
somewhat incredulous.

"Perhaps there are other uses, but I have described all
I can demonstrate."

The two men returned with a small brazier already filled with hot coals. Ruha
crushed one of the tears between her palms, then sprinkled the crumbs onto the
embers. An aromatic smoke rose from the pan, filling the entire chamber with
such a sweet, fresh smell that the
Shou finally allowed their stoic masks to slip. They began to smile openly and
crowd closer to the source, taking such deep breaths that some of them actually
snorted.
Even the stem-faced guards could not keep their nostrils

from flaring.

Wei Dao studied her entourage's reaction in bemused meditation. "This is not magic?"

"I am no spellcaster," Ruha lied. She pressed the other tear into the princess's hand and motioned toward the brazier. "It will smell just as sweet if you sprinkle the crumbs. Tomorrow, I will demonstrate its use in the making of perfumes and poultices."

Wei Dao did not step toward the brazier. "Not necessary. We buy all you have."

"What about the price?" Fowler gasped. "Aren't you even going to ask?"

Wei Dao glanced at the brazier, where her entourage stood sniffing the sweet-smelling smoke. "You already tell me it is more valuable than gold. I believe you."

Fowler shook his head in amazement, then looked back to Ruha. "Well, Lady Ruha, how much do we have?"

It took Ruha a moment to realize what he was asking, for she had not expected her plan to succeed quite so well. "I'm afraid we have very little at the moment." The witch had only three more tears in her pocket.

"You see, our ship
was sunk by a dragon—"
"By dragon?"

Wei Dao's exclamation caught Ruha as much by surprise as had the offer to buy
all her frankincense. "It was a very large dragon," the witch explained, keeping
a watchful eye on the princess's expression. "A black one.
^ Do you know it?"

|, Wei Dao's face became as unreadable as ever. "I do not
|know this dragon. But it is difficult for Shou to hear of
|dragons doing evil things."

| "Yes, I have heard your emperor is a green dragon."
| "Jade." Wei Dao bowed, suggesting that the audience
| was at an end. "Please return to Ginger Palace with more
I frankincense and myrrh."

| Ruha did not return the bow. "You may be certain we
(will—but first, we are interested in purchasing some
S wares to take with us." The witch fingered the silk veil that Hsieh had given
to her. "As you can see, the love of
Shou silk reaches even into the depths ofAnauroch."

"Of course. You discuss with Prince Tang." Wei Dao bowed again. "Come back
tomorrow, and new chamberlain sees you are among first to see my husband."

"I am sorry, but that is not possible." Ruha had to fight to keep the panic out
of her voice. "We must leave for
Ilipur tomorrow to buy a new ship."

"Then come very early in morning. Chamberlain give you first appointment." Wei Dao turned to leave, this time without bowing.

Ruha threw open the coffer in Fowler's hands. "Before you go, Princess, Abazm said you would want to see the color of our gold."

Wei Dao spun around, affronted. "Show me money? What for?"

Fowler tipped the box so she could look inside, and the princess's expression changed instantly—first to one of puzzlement, then interest.

"Yes, of course. Abazm always tells us we must inspect coins." She glided over to the box and started to reach inside, then remembered herself and asked, "May I touch?"

Ruha nodded, and Wei Dao picked up several gold pieces and raised them to her face. When Ruha saw the coin from Calimshan slide down the long sleeve of the princess's dress, she thought it best not to say anything.

"You stay tonight in Ginger Palace," Wei Dao said, as though she had thought of the idea herself. "We see Prince Tang soon after breakfast."

Seven

Ruha raised her veil, blew into the tree-shaped keyhole, and whispered the incantation to her wind spell. A short blast of air whistled softly through the slot, raising a gentle clatter as it rattled the lock. The sound was not loud, but the witch cringed.

After a long night of skulking through the Ginger Palace, she had worked her way deep into the labyrinthine corridors of the residential section, and the guards here were thick as ants in their hill.

The bolt slid back with a muffled clack. Ruha stood, then looked back down the long hall. Already, two sentries were stalking toward her, their bare feet sliding across the silk runner in utter silence. It was their incredible stealth that made the witch's search so nervewracking. She never knew when she would meet one coming around a corner, or suddenly feel someone gliding past her as she kneeled before a keyhole.

Ruha pressed herself into a corner beside the door, moving very slowly and deliberately. Although she had rendered herself invisible with a sun spell, the mirage was not perfect. Any quick motion would cause a shimmering blur that

might alert the guards to her presence.

The men stopped before the door, gesturing at the knob and whispering to each
other in the lilting language of the Shou. After arguing a few moments, they
tried the

latch. When the door swung open, they gasped and backed away, both reaching
for their square-tipped swords. One of them spoke, and the other scurried down
the hall.

The remaining guard peered into the room, calling gently, as though saying
someone's name. No one answered. He reluctantly entered the chamber, still
speaking softly. Though she was puzzled by the man's alarm, Ruha followed him
through the door and instantly realized she had found the personal quarters of
Lady
Feng.

Opposite the door was a glass window, through which spilled the pale dawn light
illuminating an anteroom similar to those Ruha had found in the private apart
ments of both the prince and princess. Like many chambers in the Ginger
Palace, this one was furnished with nothing more than a single low table and a
few straw mats. The walls were covered not by the resplendent frescoes of birds
and reptiles that decorated the other royal apartments, but

by subtly hued
paintings of symbolic portent: a snake coiled into an ascending spiral, a
feeble old man sailing backward across a rainbow, a spider that had spun its
web in the mouth of a singing woman, and many more images that would have put
the witch into a contemplative mood, had she not been so jittery from hours of
skulking about the Ginger Palace.

The guard crossed the chamber and nervously called through the doorway into the
next room. When no one answered, he reluctantly inched forward. Ruha went to the
window and, while she waited for the sentry to complete his search, looked out
upon the rear part of the palace complex. She could not see much, for a large,
highwalled enclosure sat in the middle of the grounds, blocking her view of
everything beyond save the tiled roofs of the two huge buildings the witch had
noticed yesterday.

Ruha could not decide what the enclosure was. Its walls were capped by a double
row of barbed spikes, as though it were some sort of prison, but the gates hung

open beneath a strange, scaly archway that vaguely resembled a dragon's tail.
A short, opal-paved path connected the peculiar courtyard to the mansion,
crossing an arcing, multicolored bridge and snaking through a thicket of

well-tended shrubbery. The witch noticed several sentries kneeling among the
bushes, not hiding so much as trying to avoid obtrusiveness.

Ruha was dismayed to note that the sun had already risen high enough to kindle
an iridescent glimmer in the pearly surfaces of both the walkway and the
enclosure's scaly arch. There was not much time to find Yanseldara's staff.
Soon, the breakfast servants would arrive at the guest house in the front
courtyard. Fowler could probably keep them at bay, but he would be hard-pressed
to explain the witch's absence when someone called to escort them to Prince
Tang's audience hall.

Ruha cast an impatient look toward the room the guard had gone to inspect. She
was tempted to start her own search before he left the apartment, but that would
be very dangerous. As quietly as Shou sentries moved, he might slip into the
chamber while she wasn't looking and see her move something. Besides, if anyone
in the other rooms was a light sleeper, it would be better to let the sentry
disturb them.

A short time later, the guard finally returned, muttering to himself and
glancing askance at the mystical symbols on the walls. Ruha had heard no
conversations or startled cries to suggest he had awakened anyone, so she did

not understand his anxiety. When she had inadvertently drawn the guards'
attention before, they had seemed much more confident of themselves. In one
case, they had remained quite composed while they explained to a startled
bureaucrat why they had awakened him.
Another time, they had efficiently searched an entire apartment without
disturbing the sleeping residents.

Ruha waited until the fellow left the room, then went to the door and used the
same spell she had used to unlock the latch to lock it again. A muffled cry of
surprise

sounded from the hall. The guard tried the door, again speaking softly. The
witch turned away and crept silently into the next room, not caring that she had
alarmed him further. When the other sentry returned, he would no doubt bring a
superior, who would probably insist on searching the apartment again. If the
witch was still here, the sound of the lock turning would alert her to their
arrival.

The next room appeared to be Lady Feng's dressing closet. In one corner stood a
wooden screen decorated with the painting of a naked king and queen lying
together upon a bed of purple night. In the corner opposite the screen were
two dressing bureaus, each with a costly silver mirror

hanging behind it. One
wall of the room was lined by several wardrobes decorated with paintings of
astrological constellations.

Though Ruha considered the room an unlikely place to hide Yanseldara's staff,
she paused long enough to peer behind the screen—nothing there—and open each of
the wardrobes. Inside were dozens of silk gowns in many different styles, all
dyed black as kohl and brocaded with the same endless pattern of open and closed
eyes. The witch ran her hands over the floor and explored the corners behind
the clothes. When she found nothing but sashes and slippers, she closed the
wardrobes and crept into the next chamber.

Against the far wall sat the most elaborate piece of furniture in Lady Feng's
apartment, a large canopied bed surrounded by a folding partition. Each panel
was decorated with the fearsome aspects of leering, grotesque monsters, such
as sometimes invaded a sleeper's dreams.
In their claws, the fiends carried strange, exotic weapons like those stored in
the secret armory that Ruha had discovered beneath the palace. There was a
horned goatman brandishing a two-bladed sword, a bat-winged tiger carrying a
spear with barbed points at both ends, a redeyed centaur whirling a
three-chained flail, and a wide assortment of other hideous creatures to protect

Lady

Feng's spirit while she slept.

They were not needed now. No clothes lay folded on the dressing couch beside the bed, and four of the partition panels hung open, revealing a black silken quilt embroidered with the same green dragon that hung beneath the prow of Hsieh's ship. The blanket lay neatly spread over the mattress and pillows, lacking even the slightest rumple to suggest anyone had slept beneath it the night before.

Ruha's stomach sank. She had assumed all along that she would find Yanseldara's staff somewhere near Lady Feng, but it had never occurred to her that Lady Feng would not be at home.

The absence certainly explained the guards' reaction to the rattling lock, but not much else. Perhaps Lady Feng had spent the night in a lover's chamber, or communing with the spirits in some occult place Ruha had not yet discovered. There could be any number of explanations, most of which meant the staff would not be found here.

Nevertheless, the witch decided to continue her search. Even if she failed to recover Yanseldara's staff—she could hear Vaerana maligning her already—at least

there was a chance she would find something to lead her to Lady Feng.

Ruha crawled onto the mattress and ran her hands over the black quilt, then felt
under the pillows. When she found nothing, she crawled off and straightened the
quilt, then looked under the bed and stood on the dressing couch to peer above
the canopy. She went to the corner and inspected a low writing desk. On the
surface sat a bottle of ink, a small calligraphy brush, and several blank leaves
of rice paper. A well-worn text in ancient
Dwarven sat on one corner; the witch knew just enough of the arcane language to
recognize the words "alchemy" and "first materials."

Though she could not see how it might be connected to Yanseldara's staff, the witch picked up the dwarven text. Aside from what she had already examined, there was

little else in the room. She turned to leave, and that was when she heard the
scratching.

It was as gentle as the whisper of her feet across the floor, but it was steady,
and there was something more: a weak, plaintive whimpering. Ruha returned the
dwarven text to its place, then kneeled in the corner of the room.
The scratching and the squealing grew more discernible, and she caught a faint
whiff of a gamy and slightly rank odor. An animal.

Ruha ran her fingers up the corner and felt the seam of a door. She pulled the writing desk away from the corner, and a small click sounded inside the wall.

The scratching and squealing stopped, but the gamy odor grew stronger. Resisting the urge to pull laerjambiya—if she attacked anything, the sun spell would fail and render her instantly visible—the witch laid her palms on a fresco of what looked like a slumbering mountain and pushed.

A hidden panel swung open, revealing the interior of a cluttered chamber. A small, white-furred face peered around the edge of the door. At first, Ruha thought the thing was a monkey, until she saw that its black-tipped muzzle was long and foxlike. Then she noted the black mask around its eyes and thought it looked like a raccoon, save that its head was as small and narrow as that of a weasel.

The creature, whatever it was, regarded the empty doorway for an instant, and then its nose twitched and its ears pricked forward. It raised its dark eyes, which remained as expressionless as they were large, toward Ruha's face and chittered despondently. For a moment, the witch thought the little animal could not see her and was disappointed at finding no one in the door. Then it slipped forward, revealing an emaciated body and a white-ringed

tail, and gently pawed at her with two tiny black hands.

Hoping the creature was not trying to defend its territory, Ruha stepped past
it into the secret chamber.

Beneath a brass chandelier in the center of the room stood a worktable, the
surface barely visible beneath a jumble of braziers, balances, cauldrons, and
other alchemical instruments. Three of the laboratory walls were completely
concealed behind rows of tall wooden cabinets, some so full of books and flasks
they could not close. The fourth wall had two glass windows, beneath which were
a red silk cushion, a box of fetid-smelling sand, and two silver bowls licked
so clean they gleamed like mirrors.

I When Ruha paused at the worktable to examine Lady
| Feng's apparatus, Chalk Ears, as she was beginning to
| think of the black-masked creature, leapt onto the only clear corner. It fixed
its expressionless eyes on her face, watching her so intently she raised a hand
to make certain she had not suddenly become visible. When the witch could not
see her own flesh, she regarded Chalk
Ears with a wary eye, then reached toward a flask of what looked like powdered
blood.

A surprisingly sinister growl rolled from the creature's small throat. The hair

rose along its spine and it lifted itself on its haunches, baring a mouthful of needlelike fangs. Ruha retracted her arm, and the little beast settled back onto its corner. The witch clasped her hands behind her back, then slowly walked around the table, studying the rest of the apparatus. Other than a fine coating of dust, she saw nothing to tell her what had become of Lady Feng. Chalk Ears watched her intently, but made no further objections as long as she did not attempt to touch anything.

Ruha went to the first cabinet. Chalk Ears jumped off the table and took a post at her heels. Keeping a careful eye on her little escort, she pulled the door open. As before, the creature watched her carefully, and any doubts about its ability to see her vanished from the witch's mind. Whatever it was, the animal clearly had some defenses against magic, and that could only mean Chalk Ears was Lady Feng's familiar, linked to her by a special bond of magic and love.

Ruha had never had a familiar, since the spell that summoned them had more to do with the spirit than the elements. But she had heard other

witches describe the
strength of the union. Sometimes, the two were so closely bound that, over
relatively short distances, they could see through each other's eyes and hear
through each other's ears.

Ruha kneeled in front of the familiar. "Lady Feng?" she whispered, looking into
the creature's big eyes. "Are you there?"

Chalk Ears blinked, but the tiny beast made no move to suggest that it
understood.

"Why have you left your familiar alone, Lady Feng? It is starving. Shall I feed
it for you and give it water?"

Again, Chalk Ears did nothing. The witch breathed a sigh of relief, confident
there would have been some response if Lady Feng were listening. Even if the
starving creature's mistress was as cruel as Afar the Merciless, she would
share its pain and be anxious to have it cared for. In fact, it seemed
unthinkable that Lady Feng would allow the little beast to fall into such a
wretched state unless she had been forced to depart under the direst
circumstances.

A muffled crash rumbled through Lady Feng's apartment, and guards began to
call from the anteroom. Ruha stepped into the bedchamber

and pulled the writing
desk back into its comer, then slipped into the laboratory and closed the secret
door. She pressed her ear to the panel and heard several men rush into the room,
still calling out as though they expected Lady Feng to return at any moment. Wei
Dao arrived and began issuing commands.
The witch listened for several moments more. When she heard no one dragging the
desk from its place, she decided they did not know about the secret room and
quietly resumed her search.

With Chalk Ears watching intently, Ruha carefully opened each cabinet and looked
over the contents. To a nomad's eye at least, they contained an overabundance of

magical supplies: scrolls and tomes in many different languages, a glut of
ingredients for every spell imaginable and some that were not, arcane
instruments so obscure the witch could not guess their purpose. Still, she found
no sign ofYanseldara's staff, nor any clue of Lady
Feng's whereabouts, nor any hint as to why the Shou sorceress had abandoned
her familiar.

Finally, Ruha came to a locked cabinet, and Chalk
Ears' long tail began to flick madly. The little beast rose on its haunches and
sniffed at the doors, dripping a long stream of drool from its muzzle. The witch
examined the latch and discovered that she could pop it

easily enough, but Wei Dao and the guards were still shuffling about in Lady Feng's bedchamber. Fearful of making any sharp noises that might draw their attention to the secret room, Ruha decided to move to the last cabinet.

A long, deep growl rumbled from the familiar's throat. The fur rose along its spine, and it slunk toward Ruha with bared fangs. The witch pulled herjambiya and brandished it menacingly in front of Chalk Ears' face.

The creature's tail rose straight into the air. It slowly backed away, then took refuge beneath another cabinet and began to whine.

Cursing the black-masked beast for a scoundrel and a blackmailer, Ruha returned to the locked cabinet and slipped her dagger blade into the door seam. Chalk Ears stopped crying and slunk from its hiding place, being careful to remain well out of reach. The witch worked her jambiya down to the latch, then twisted the blade against the jamb.

The door popped open with a loud bang and a puff of yellow smoke. Ruha cried out in shock and found herself sitting halfway across the room, hurled there more by her own surprise than the force of the blast. A scolding harangue erupted from inside the cabinet, and the image of a tall, willowy woman appeared in the air before the doors. She looked almost ancient, with coarse

gray hair pulled into a
tight bun and a deeply wrinkled

face. Something seemed wrong with her eyes; one of them was almost closed,
while the other bulged from its socket as though it might fall out. The woman
wagged her finger at the floor and continued her diatribe, sending Chalk Ears
yelping and skittering across the floor to take refuge behind Ruha. The illusion
looked so real the stunned witch did not fully grasp that the trap had not been
intended to frighten her until Lady Feng's familiar peered out from behind her
and voiced a pitiful plea for food.

The voices of several astonished Shou guards cried out from the other side of
the wall, at once puzzled and frightened. Wei Dao called something out, sounding
more shocked and bewildered than the soldiers.

The illusion—no doubt an image of Lady Feng herself—continued to harangue the
floor. Ruha gathered herself up, forcing herself to remain calm and consider her
options. Hiding was out of the question, for the Shou would certainly
investigate until they discovered the cause of all the strange noises. That left
only escape, and, as far as the witch could see, there was only one possible
route.

Finally, the illusion faded. Chalk Ears cautiously slunk toward the doors Ruha had pried open, where two large ceramic urns contained supplies of food and water that, apparently, the familiar had been unable to reach for several days.
The guards, and then Wei Dao herself, called out. When they received no answer, the princess spoke again, this time in a more commanding tone.

Ruha went to the glass windows and looked out. She was on the second story of the palace, no more than thirty feet off the ground. The sentries lurking in the shrubbery around the opal path were all looking away from the mansion, toward the strange enclosure. When they heard the glass break, they would certainly turn toward the sound, so the witch would have to take care not to reveal herself by moving too fast.

Wei Dao spoke again, this time in Common. "I know it

is you, Witch! Come out now, or you go to Chamber of One Thousand Painful Deaths!"

Ruha had seen the room to which the princess referred. It was a dank, fetid place in the deepest of the palace's sub-basements, filled with all manor of chains, hooks, and grim instruments of agony.

Chalk Ears leapt up and grabbed the rim of a ceramic um. The whole thing toppled

out of the cabinet and shattered, spilling a pool of stale water over the
floor. Wei
Dao hissed a command, and sword pommels began to hammer at the wall.

Summoning a wind spell to mind, Ruha grabbed the brazier off the worktable and
hurled it through a window.
She followed it an instant later, uttering the syllables of her incantation as
she fell. A terrific gust of wind tore across the courtyard and rose up beneath
her, catching her body in an airy bed as soft as a cloud. The witch som
ersaulted once to bring her feet beneath her, then settled to the ground as
though stepping off a stairway.

The sentries in the shrubbery began to yell at each other in Shou. Several rose
from their posts and started to run toward the mansion, drawing an angry shout
from a young, moon-faced officer. The guards stopped where they were, but
continued to stare toward the mansion, squinting and furrowing their brows as
they tried to find the strange blur that had just come crashing out the win
dow.

Ruha's stomach had tied itself into knots. The coward in her wanted to flee as
quickly as possible, but that would be exactly what her hunters expected.
Certainly, a messenger was already rushing to the barracks

to call out the
guard. Besides, the witch had not yet found
Yanseldara's staff, and if the sentries would not leave their posts to
investigate a breaking window, whatever they were protecting had to be
important. Ruha turned toward the enclosure and, ever so slowly, began to creep
down the opal path.

***V-Sf.

Over the garden wall came the tintinnabulation of breaking glass. Prince Tang
rose and scowled toward the palace, but the crest of the rampart rose just high
enough to block the second-story windows—he himself had made certain of that—and
he could not see what had happened. No matter. Windowpanes cost as much as
diamonds, but this morning he was working on the problem of the ants, and he
had only a short time to solve it before his officious wife fetched him to meet
with some new merchant.

Tang glanced at the gate, hanging slightly ajar, and wondered if he dared close
it. He had repaired only a quarter of the damage to his garden, and every day he
failed to restore the delicate balance meant more dead lizards. Still, he could
not hazard shutting himself off from his guards. Minister Hsieh was well

overdue, which meant the fresh ylang blossoms had not yet been pressed, which
meant Cypress was likely to appear at any moment, spitting acid and demanding
his oil.

It puzzled Tang that the dragon had not come already
It had been seven days since the last visit, far longei than Cypress had granted
him to provide the oil, and still there had been no demands or threats. The
prince was not anxious for the call, of course, but he was prepared. His
guards—half new, half veterans of the dragon's first appearance—had been eating
lasal leaves, a mind-numbing herb that defended against the effects of the
Invisible Art. Unfortunately, it also caused tremors and disorientation, and as
often as not left longterm users little better than zombies.

Trying to force all thoughts of Cypress from his mind,
Tang kneeled in the sand, turning back to the problem of the ants. On a slab of
stone before him, four Thornback lizards were basking in the morning sun,
warming their cold blood in preparation for the day's activities. They should
have been plump and round of body, with blotchy,

tan-colored hides indistinguishable from the sand of the desert quarter.
Instead, they were no fatter than snakes and as white as alabaster, almost
translucent at the tips of their stumpy tails. After Cypress's attack, all of

the ants upon which the lizards preyed had mysteriously vanished from the garden, perhaps destroyed or driven away by the Invisible Art.

The prince opened one of the many small lacquered boxes he had brought into the park. A pair of red ants that had survived their capture tried to escape. He killed the fugitives and returned them to the container with their ten dead fellows, then sprinkled all twelve bodies onto the stone. The tongue of a single Thornback lashed out and caught one insect in midair, but it showed no interest in the others. The remaining lizards paid the offering no attention at all.

Tang sighed and reached for the fifteenth box. After several failed attempts to feed the lizards common household ants, he had ordered his servants to capture twelve of every kind of ant that lived within a mile of the Ginger Palace. He had not realized there were so many varieties, or that even Thornbacks could be so particular about the ones they ate.

Tang opened the box and found several large carpenter ants trying to chew their way to freedom. Deciding it would be necessary to punish his servants for their carelessness, he smashed the survivors and dumped the whole box onto the stone. These plumper insects seemed to interest the lizards more than the

previous offerings, as they each snapped up one or two before they stopped
eating.

The prince threw the lacquered box down in the sand.
"You are foolish old men! Food need not taste good to save life!"

As one, the Thornbacks lifted their bodies off the rock.
They puffed out their throats and bobbed their heads up and down in the
universal challenge of lacertilians. At first. Tang thought his exhortation had
angered them,

but then he realized they were looking past him toward the Arch of Many-Hued
Scales.
The gates were closed and barred.

Ruha breathed a sigh of relief, then braced her hands against the timber
crosspiece and tried to stop trembling. The trip down the path of opals had
been as nerve-wracking as it had been long. When Wei Dao appeared in the
mansion's broken window, the moonfaced officer had sent half his men down the
path to see what was wrong. The witch had barely managed to creep off the trail
before the sentries rushed past, and despite her caution, one of the men's eyes
had briefly drifted in her direction.

After receiving instructions from the princess, the detail had spread out in all
directions to begin searching for her. In the meantime, the young officer had
assembled the rest of his men at the rainbow-colored bridge, and Ruha had been
forced to creep past them less than a hand's breadth behind their backs. By the
time she had passed beneath the enclosure's scaly gate, the first guards from
the barracks were arriving to join the search for her. Though they had not
seemed to realize she was invisible, the witch felt certain that Wei Dao would
surmise as much as soon as she emerged from the mansion to direct the search.

From behind Ruha came the metallic swish of a sword leaving its scabbard. She
turned to see that the foolish
Shou who was trying to feed dead ants to spiny sand iguanas had risen. The witch
could not help gasping, and not because she feared the square-tipped sword he
now held in his hands.

It was the man from her vision on the raft. He had the same upturned nose,
smooth complexion, and silky black hair, but it was his eyes that convinced her.
They were deep and dark, at once confident and self-absorbed. His

jaw was set but not tense, and the stance he had adopted suggested that he was

no stranger to holding a sword.
Ruha realized at once that her first evaluation, made from a hasty glance at the
fellow's back, had been mistaken; this was no simple gardener.

The man studied the gates for a moment, then glanced at his lizards and opened
his mouth to call his guards.

"Please, there is no need to call for help." Ruha spoke softly and started
across the courtyard, moving quickly enough so that he would see her as a
shimmering column of air. "I mean you no harm."

An expression of relief crossed the Shou's face. He started to lower his sword,
then glanced at the barred gate and raised it again.

"Do not think of crying out," Ruha warned. She had reached the edge of the
courtyard, where the stones gave way to sand. "I have no wish to harm you.
Perhaps I can even be of service, if you wish to know why the spiny iguanas will
not eat your ants."

"Come no closer." The Shou pointed his sword more or less in Ruha's direction,
holding it with both hands so there would be no question of disarming him with a
quick strike. "Deliver your message and go."

Ruha stopped at the base of a miniature sand dune.
"What of the iguanas?"

"I take care ofThornbacks myself." The man's eyes turned cold and angry, as
though he blamed his unseen visitor for the condition of his lizards. "Your
message?"

"Why do you think I have come to deliver a message?"

The Shou's jaw dropped, and the anger in his eyes changed to puzzlement.
"Perhaps you show yourself, wujen." The man took the precaution of retreating
a step, then lowered his sword. "And I do not call guards."

Ruha hesitated to do as he asked. Having seen him in a mirage from the future,
she was determined not to leave the park without learning more about him, but
her curiosity did not translate into trust. Once she showed herself, she would
be at the mercy of his sword—a

weapon that, from all appearances, he was quite capable of handling.

As if sensing her thoughts, the Shou retrieved a scabbard from the ground and
sheathed his weapon. "Show yourself, wu-jen, or I draw sword and call guards."

"As you wish."

Ruha raised her hand as though to strike, and her spell evaporated in a curtain

of shimmering air. The
Shou's gaze ran up her the entire length of the witch's aba, over her orange
silk veil, then lingered on her dark eyes. Slowly, his expression changed from
wary to pleased to covetous, leaving Ruha uncertain as to whether she was
meeting an unexpected friend or an incorrigible lecher.

"Who—who are you?" The Shou paused a moment, then continued to gaze into her
eyes as he asked the second part of his question, "And who sends you to spy on
Ginger Palace—Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Though Ruha was startled by the man's deduction, she tried not to let it show.
She walked toward the Thornbacks' basking stone, being careful to hold her
hands in plain sight. Then, recalling how he had originally mistaken her for a
messenger and remembering how his face had changed to that of a dragon in her
vision, she decided to answer his question with a deduction of her own.

"I was not sent by Cypress, if that is what you fear."

The Shou allowed a gracious smile to cross his lips, then prudently stepped away
from the basking stone.
"We play at same game." The Thornbacks followed his lead, clambering over the
side to bury themselves beneath the sand. "But who is Cypress?"

Ruha locked gazes with the Shou. "He is the dragon, of course—the one I saw you with."

"You are… mistaken." The Shou looked away, and, for the first time, seemed in danger of losing his composure. "What you claim is impossible."

Ruha glanced at the throng of dead ants lying upon the basking stone, then shook her head. "You have

watched, but you have not considered."

She grabbed several lacquered boxes and leaned over the basking stone, then began emptying the contents onto the sand. A cascade of ants of all sizes and three different colors—red, black, and brown—poured onto the sand. Close to a dozen of the insects bounced up on their six legs and began to scurry away. The lizards came instantly alive, scrambling from their hiding places to devour the fugitives in a flurry of whipping heads and darting tongues.

"Ants must be alive!" the Shou gasped, looking back to Ruha. "But why?"

"You have never lived in the desert, or you would know. Small creatures like lizards often pass their entire lives without seeing water," Ruha explained. "They must take their fluids from their prey—but only from living prey. Dead

bodies dry out swiftly in hot temperatures, and water is too precious to waste
digesting parched carcasses."

The Shou watched his lizards catch the last of the moving ants, then he opened
another box and dumped the contents onto the sand. Again, the lizards gobbled up
the live insects and left the dead ones undisturbed.

Across the little courtyard came the clatter of someone trying to open the
barred gates. When the portals did not swing apart, Wei Dao's muted voice rolled
over the wall, speaking excitedly in Shou.

Ruha's hand dropped toward herjambiya, but the
Shou raised his hand to reassure her.

"Yes, the wu-jen is here with me." He spoke in Common, so Ruha could
understand him. "Not to worry. I am safe."

There was a confused murmur outside the gates, then all fell silent beneath the
Arch ofMany-Hued Scales. The
Shou, whom the witch now felt certain to be Prince Tang, turned back to Ruha.

"They do not disturb us. Please to accept my gratitude for saving of
Thornbacks." Though the prince's tone was

warm, he did not meet Ruha's eyes as he spoke. "But I do not understand how

feeding habits of lizards concern this dragon Cypress."

"Is it not true that Lady Feng's kidnappers need her alive, just as the
Thornbacks need the ants alive?" asked
Ruha, implying that she knew for a fact what she was only guessing at. "What
will they do once she has fin ished enslaving Yanseldara's spirit for them?"

Tang looked up, his eyes both betraying his astonishment and veiling something
more. "You are accomplished wu-jen." The prince spread his palms and smiled
warmly.
"Household of Ginger Palace has need for someone like you."

Ruha scowled, taken aback by the directness of the prince's approach. "We both
know I am here on behalf of someone else."

Tang shook his head emphatically. "Oh, no! I do not speak of hiring. I mean to
make you Virtuous Concubine."

"Concubine!" Ruha cried, both stunned and affronted by the offer.

Tang stumbled an uncertain step backward. A concerned murmur began to build
outside the gate; then the prince squared his shoulders and stepped back to the
basking stone.

"You do not understand, wu-jen." Now he was speaking between clenched teeth.

"Virtuous Concubine is honored position in house of Shou prince. Lady Feng is
Third Virtuous Concubine, and you become Worthy Daughter to
Third Virtuous Concubine to Emperor of Shou Lung. It is position more worthy
than queen of any realm in Heartlands!"

Ruha began to feel a little embarrassed by her outburst, though she still
found it strange that any man would propose such a thing without first making
inquiries about her family. "Prince Tang, what you offer is clear enough. Still,
I must decline."

Tang looked as though she had punched him in the

stomach. "You—you refuse me? A prince of Shou Lung?"

A muted thump reverberated across the courtyard;
then the top rungs of a ladder appeared above the gates.
Ruha was not overly concerned. Tang had tacitly admitted that his mother had
been kidnapped by the Cult of the Dragon, and in her mind at least, that made
them allies, not enemies.

"I am sorry, Prince," Ruha said. "I cannot become your concubine. My other
obligations would interfere."

Tang considered Ruha as though he did not understand the language she was
speaking. The covetous expression she had glimpsed earlier once again filled his

eyes, this time stronger than ever.

"I give you your weight in gold each year," Tang promised. "And I build you
private palace!"

Behind Ruha, a familiar voice made a harsh demand in Shou. The witch looked
across the courtyard and was astonished to see Wei Dao herself clambering
through the narrow space between the gate tops and the archway.
The princess was dressed in a simple black tunic and trousers uniform, with a
row of slender daggers hanging from a black sash tied around her waist.

"Ginger Palace needs good wu-jen." Though Tang spoke in Common, his comment was
directed toward his
wife.

"But not Ruha," Wei Dao countered, also speaking in
Common. She lowered her toes onto the crossbar, then nimbly jumped to the
ground. "She sneaks into Lady
Feng's private chambers—and breaks window when she tries to escape."

Ruha turned her back on Wei Dao and faced Tang.
"Prince, it is not necessary that I become your concubine to serve the Ginger
Palace."

The witch heard Wei Dao's light footsteps coming across the courtyard and

realized the princess had not bothered to unbar the gate for the guards. Happy to see that her hosts did not consider her a threat to their safety, she continued to face Tang.

"Prince Tang, we all wish to see your mother delivered from the hands of her captors. Does that not make us friends?"

"No!" Tang snapped, with surprising vigor in his voice. His eyes briefly flickered past Ruha's shoulder and returned. "I serve the Emperor of Shou Lung, and you serve … a lesser master."

"But we all oppose the Cult of the Dragon." Though she was aware that Wei Dao had stopped a short distance behind her, Ruha kept her attention fixed on Prince Tang, determined to win his friendship without becoming a Virtuous Concubine. "In the desert, we have a saying: the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Tang's eyes flashed in anger; then he slipped around the basking stone so swiftly that Ruha barely had time to turn around before he was standing between her and the gates. The witch found herself looking over his shoulder at Wei Dao, who was standing ten paces away with one of her slender daggers cocked to throw.

"I say no," Tang said, speaking to his wife. "Put wasp knife away."

Wei Dao did not lower the weapon. "Foolish Husband, you turn back on spy! Why do
you place yourself in danger? What is wrong with you?"

"What is wrong with .you?" Tang countered. "Do you defy command of Imperial Shou
Prince?"

Wei Dao's eyes flared in surprise and hurt. She looked past Tang's shoulder and
shot Ruha a look as deadly as her wasp knife, then reluctantly lowered both her
weapon and her gaze.

"I do not mean to disobey Exalted Prince." The Princess bowed deeply to her
husband. "I think only of your safety"

Ruha felt herself take a deep breath; then she slipped from behind Prince Tang
and executed a bow of her own, to Wei Dao. "You have nothing to fear from me.
Radiant
Princess. I come as a friend to Lady Feng and the Ginger Palace, nothing more."

Wei Dao's lips curled into a sneer. "Yes, spy always comes as friend. But do not
think me stupid, Witch. You care nothing for our troubles, and I watch to make
certain you do not harm Beloved Husband."

Recognizing that it was impossible to make peace with

Wei Dao, Ruha turned to the prince. "I thank you for sparing my life, Wise
Prince. I assure you, I will repay the favor with friendship."

"It is not friendship I desire," Tang replied. Deftly, he reached down and
pulled Ruha's jambiya from its scabbard, moving so swiftly and smoothly that
she did not realize what he was doing until he held the weapon in his hand. "In
Ginger Palace, you serve me, or you serve no
one."

Eight

^Gagged with her own silken veil k^ and forced to kneel upon the brick
^ ^ floor with her wrists bound behind her back to her ankles, Ruha glared at
her captors. Tang and Wei Dao stood at the far end of a long lime-washed vault,
mincing blossoms and filling the air with a tangy perfume as sweet as cassia.
Though clean and tidy enough, the chamber was crammed with all manner of vats,
ovens, and other spice-refining apparatus.

Tang and Wei Dao set their knives aside, then gathered up the minced blossoms
and carried them to a large screw press in the corner. As soon as their backs
were turned, the witch fixed her gaze upon a flickering oil lamp near the door

and slipped her gag as the Harpers had taught her, by retracting her lower jaw
until she could use her tongue to push it over her lip onto her chin. Beneath
her breath, she uttered the incantation of a simple sun spell.

The flame coiled around itself, then leapt off the wick and pirouetted to the
floor. Ruha tried to point toward a huge ceramic cask sitting in the corner but,
with her hands tied behind her back, she failed miserably. The fire danced
across the bricks toward a gleaming copper vat, which caught its light and sent
a reddish glint skipping across the ceiling.

Wei Dao's head cocked slightly.

Ruha bent her finger sharply, directing the flicker toward a black iron caldron.
She barely managed to guide the flame behind the pot's sheltering bulk before
Wei Dao turned to scan the ceiling. The witch tongued her gag back into place
and waited until her captor's scrutiny fell on her, then glowered at the
princess with a frown that she hoped would look as helpless as it did
hateful.

Wei Dao smirked at the witch, then allowed her gaze to roam across the room
until it came to the unlit lamp. If she noticed the faint wisps of smoke still
rising from the nameless wick, she paid them no attention.

The concern vanished from her face, and she turned back to Prince Tang.

"Thisss … dangerous, my husssband." Wei Dao spoke in Shou, unaware that a wind spell was carrying her voice to Ruha in the Bedine language. Unfortunately, the magic did not work well in the still air of the vault; the words were so breathy and soft that the witch sometimes missed them. "We ssshould… her and be done with it!"

"She ssserve us better alive." Tang turned the press screw, then glanced at Ruha and allowed his gaze to linger on her naked face for an indecent time, at least by Bedine standards. "We have need o/'wu-jen."

"… much trussst in love potion!" Wei Dao pointed a dagger-sharp fingernail at her husband. "Witch use love magic on you, wise husssband."

Prince Tang shrugged. "It doesss not matter, as long as she love me more. We need wu-jen, and Ruha is wu-jen."

Wei Dao's face grew crimson and stormy. The princess was no fool and believed Tang no more than Ruha did; the prince needed the witch's magic, but he coveted her womanhood.

"How witch love you more?" Wei Dao demanded. "You sssayyiang … not potent."

"Potent enough for now. When fresssh blossoms arrive, I make better potion."

Ruha pointed her finger toward the wall behind her.
The wayward flame danced from its hiding place and began to skip across the
floor.

"You are bad ssson! You risssk mother for—for—" Wei Dao's sentence sputtered to a halt, and she flung her arm in Ruha's direction.
"You risssk mother's life for barbarian concubine!"

There was that word again, concubine. Ruha ground her teeth into her gag, biting
down until her jaws ached.
She did not leave the golden sands ofAnauroch to become a prince's bauble; if
the Shou thought differently, she would show them barbarian.

"Not for concubine, for wu-jen." Tang's head started to turn in Ruha's
direction, and she barely managed to guide her dancing flame beneath a brazier
before his lecherous gaze fell on her face again. "And risk is mossst sssmall."

Wei Dao shook her head violently. "Already… over the wall!"

Whatever the princess said to the prince, it drew his

attention away from Ruha.
The witch gestured with her finger, and the lamp flame darted from its hiding
place.

"What you think he tell… Hawklyn?" Wei Dao demanded. "What you think witch say
ifssshe essscape, too?"

Ruha forgot about her dancing flame. Fowler had escaped! She doubted the
half-ore could report anything useful to Vaerana, but at least the witch would
not have to add his death to her already overburdened conscience.
She circled her finger, guiding the lamp flame, which had curled toward her
captors, back toward her.

Prince Tang scowled at his wife. "Why do you not tell me sssooner?"

"You at work in lizard park, leaving me to chase ssspies!" Wei Dao countered.
"Perhapsss wise prince ssshould…"

Whatever the princess said, it angered her husband greatly. Tang raised his
fist; then, when Wei Dao did not

flinch, he turned away and swept a shelf clean of several porcelain jars. They
shattered on the floor, releasing a cloud of fine, multihued powders. The prince
let his chin drop and stared into the billowing dusts, his eyes focused

someplace far beneath the bricks.

The lamp flame reached Ruha's side. She beckoned it around behind her, scorching her insteps as she guided it between her sandaled feet. Soon, the witch felt a tongue of fire licking at her fingers; then she caught a whiff of burning hemp.

She began to move the flame back and forth, never allowing it to rest beneath her bindings for more than a second at a time. The syrupy perfume of minced ylang blossoms still hung in the air, but not so heavily that she dared let the acrid fumes of a rope fire spread through the chamber.

When Prince Tang finally raised his head, he had regained the characteristic composure of the Shou. "What can half-man tell Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Wei Dao lowered her eyes. "J(isss impossible to sssay. Guards do not sssee him leave Cinnamon House during night, but neither do they sssee witch go—and we find her in apartment of Lady Feng."

"Then we assume most wretched prossspect." The prince took a copper beaker from a shelf and held it beneath the drainage spout of the oil press, then opened the valve. The sound of trickling fluid echoed through the vault, and the tangy smell of the ylang blossoms grew overwhelming in its cloying sweetness.

"Perhapsss halfman report mother's abduction, but that isss crime of

Cypress, not Ginger Palace."

"Vaerana Hawklyn… woman," Wei Dao observed.
"She know we do anything to ransssom mother!"

"But she doesss not realize we must." Tang did not look up as he spoke. "It is
no sssecret that Lady Feng hasss won favor ofYen-Wang-Yeh. Ssso, when Vaerana
Hawklyn hear of worthy mother's abduction, what doesss she think?"

Wei Dao furrowed her carefully plucked eyebrows.

"That Cypress needsss Venerable Scholar of Eighteen
Hells to ssssteal spirit ofYanseldara, ofcourssse."

Ruha nearly howled as the lamp flame scorched her knuckles, for she had been
listening so intently to her captors' conversation that she had neglected the
tiny fire.
Having deduced already that Lady Feng had been abducted for the purpose of
stealing Yanseldara's spirit, the witch found it less surprising that the Shou
would cooperate with the kidnappers than that they seemed to think Cypress
remained in good health. She moved the lamp flame a safe distance behind her and
resumed eavesdropping.

"… more." Prince Tang closed the drain valve and carried his copper beaker to

a marble-topped table. "Vaerana Hawklyn hasss no reason to think Cypress
requires more from usss to complete ssspell."

A sly smile crept across Wei Dao's painted lips. "Ssso she is looking wrong way
at aussspicious time. Perhaps it is good... essscaped, wise husband." The princess
cast a spiteful glare in Ruha's direction. "Now only witch threaten sssafe
return of worthy mother."

"That sssoon change." Tang removed the stopper from a small earthenware flask
and poured the contents into his copper beaker, then pricked his finger with a
needle.
He dribbled several drops of blood into the mixture.
"When ssshe drinks thisss, her only wish isss to obey me."

Feeling herself flush with outrage at the prince's plan,
Ruha took several deep breaths. Her best chance to leam more about the theft of
Yanseldara's spirit lay in exploiting Tang's base cravings, and the witch knew
such a plan would fail if anger showed in her face. She tried to calm herself by
thinking of the Alam'ra Wall, a beautiful oasis where the sweet waters poured
from a cliff of white stone. At the same time, she beckoned the lamp flame
closer and resumed the burning of her ropes. One way or another, she would need
her hands free. Whether she succeeded in manipulating the prince or not, she had
no intention of allowing him to pour his potion down her

throat. Besides, Ruha knew better than to think the princess would stand idly by while she tried to win Tang's confidence. The witch had seen the antagonism between her father's wives often enough to know that Wei Dao was jealous of her position and would do whatever was necessary to keep her husband from taking a consort.

Prince Tang stirred his concoction with a long glass rod, then poured it into a pewter chalice. He motioned to Wei Dao and started toward Ruha.

"Do not frighten wu-jen," he said. "For bessst effect, she mussst drink potion of her own accord."

The witch tested her bonds, found they still held, and lowered the knot into the lamp flame. Even she could not smell the hemp being scorched, so thickly did the cloying reek of ylang oil hang in the chamber. She continued to strain at the rope until her captors were almost upon her. Then, fearing they would notice a wisp of smoke or a flickering reflection behind her, she beckoned the fire into her hands and smothered it between her palms.

Tang and Wei Dao arrived with the love potion. The prince kneeled on the floor before Ruha and pulled her gag over her chin. His wife stood

behind him, with
one hand close to the wasp knives hanging from her black waist sash.

"If you still have no wish to become my concubine, drink this," Tang said in
Common. He held his chalice to
Ruha's mouth. "It makes you forget what you see in Ginger Palace, so we can
release you without fear."

Gently working her wrists back and forth against her seared bindings, Ruha
stared down her nose at the oily pink concoction. It looked about as appetizing
as camel's blood, and its syrupy sweetness was twice as nauseating.
The witch could hardly bear to sniff the stuff, much less drink it.

"I have no wish to forget what I have seen in the Ginger Palace."

"Then you do not leave."

"Be that as it may, I still will not become your concubine." Ruha raised her
chin. "Such a thing would not be fitting. I am a sheikh's daughter."

Tang's eyes shined with a hopeful gleam and, mercifully, he lowered the
chalice. "What do you mean?"

"In Anauroch, a man may take as many wives as his camels can feed." A muffled
grinding sounded between
Wei Dao's clenched teeth, but Ruha ignored the noise and looked deeply into
Tang's eyes. "I suppose a Shou prince can feed as many wives as he wishes."

"Her insolence is beyond forbearance!" Wei Dao pulled a knife from her sash. "I
slay this savage!"

With a movement so swift that Ruha saw only a blur,
Tang's hand lashed out and caught his wife's wrist. In
Shou, he said, "It isss for me to decide what is insssolence."

"You cannot take barbarian for wife." Wei Dao protested. "Emperor never invite
usss to return."

The prince shrugged, then pushed Wei Dao's hand toward her sash. "We need wu-jen
if we are ever to be sssafe from Cypress." He turned back to Ruha. "Please to
pardon princess. She is only wife for many years and cannot help being
spoiled."

Ruha continued to work at her bonds and graced the princess with a benevolent
smile. "After she grows accustomed to the new arrangement, I am certain we
will become great friends."

Wei Dao's only response was to thrust her dagger into its sheath, but Tang

accepted Ruha's reply with an equally gracious nod. "Of course that is possible,
but what of obligations you speak of earlier? If they interfere with being
concubine, how do they not interfere with becoming wife?"

"If you are willing to marry me, then you must also be willing to make one
accommodation," Ruha replied.

"I tell you thisss no good!" Wei Dao scoffed. "If you value mother's life and
honor of Ginger Palace, you let me kill her now."

Ruha cast an impatient glance at Wei Dao. "I suspect our discussion would
proceed more smoothly if we were alone. Prince Tang." She felt something slip in
the knot behind her, but her hands did not come free. "Perhaps you could ask the
princess to excuse us?"
"Do not be fool. Witch cassst spell on you."
Prince Tang looked at his wife out of the corner of his eye. "It is better to
have princess here—as long as she behaves courteously. Otherwise, perhaps I do
as you suggest, wu-jen." He returned his gaze to Ruha. "Now, tell me of this
accommodation you desire."

"I have every desire to see Lady Feng released, but not at Yanseldara's
expense," Ruha replied. "If you will stand with Vaerana Hawklyn against the Cult
of the Dragon, becoming your wife would not interfere with

my obligations."

"What do I tell you, wise husband? Witch never be good wife." Then, in Shou, the princess added, "Ssshe baits you like witless bear."

Tang scowled, but again raised the silver chalice to Ruha's lips. "Perhaps you should drink, wu-jen. What you ask is impossible."

Ruha gagged and pulled away from the potion's mawkish smell. "Why? If it is Cypress you fear, there is no need. He is dead. I destroyed him myself."

Wei Dao snorted, and the prince raised his brow—but he did not lower the goblet. "Perhaps you do destroy Cypress, but if you think that means there is no reason to fear him, you know nothing."

"Then tell me." At last, the rope came apart. Ruha stifled a gasp of surprise and barely kept her wrists from drifting apart to betray her escape. "If I understand, maybe I can help."

"You are not that powerful, Witch," said Wei Dao. Tang was not so quick to denounce Ruha's abilities. He regarded the witch thoughtfully, then said, "You cannot help, but perhaps you think differently about defying the Cult of the Dragon."

"I could." The thought was not entirely outside the realm of possibility.

The prince glanced down at his pink concoction. "But if you still do not change
mind, you drink potion?"

"So I will forget what you tell me?" Ruha asked, pretending she did not know
the potion's true purpose. Her ankles were still bound together, and she needed
more time to break the scorched rope. "Are you trying to keep the cult's
secrets?"

From the way Wei Dao's eyes flashed and Tang's complexion darkened, the witch
knew she had hit on a subject worth probing.

"Why should you protect the cult?" Even as Ruha asked the question, the answer
came to her. "Are you in it?"

Again, Wei Dao pulled a dagger, but Tang shook his head to stop her from
attacking. He looked away from
Ruha and fixed his gaze on the chamber door, his expression equal parts shame
and relief.

"I join when we come here." The prince's voice was hardly a whisper. "In Shou
Lung, dragons are magnanimous and most honorable. How do I know they are

different in Elversult?"

"Then what happened?" Ruha found herself feeling almost sorry for the hapless
prince. "Did you try to quit?"

Tang slowly brought his gaze back to Ruha. "If I
answer, you must drink potion."

Ruha nearly choked on her anger, but she forced herself to give him a
beguiling smile. "Of course, assuming you do not convince me to stay."

"That is most wonderful possibility." The prince looked away, and again his
voice grew low and ashamed.
"Cypress does not allow me to leave cult. He says even prince cannot break
promise to dragon. He sinks all my ships until I promise to smuggle poisons for
his murderers and spell ingredients for his wu-jens. The trade is most
lucrative, but I cannot sleep."

Ruha cringed to think of what would trouble Tang's

conscience. "But why would he attack one of your ships now? You are still
doing as he demands?"

Tang's head spun back to Ruha. "He attacks one of my ships?"

"Yes, the Ginger Lady."

The prince's face paled to the color of ivory, but it was Wei Dao who demanded, "How do you know this?"

"Because that is when I destroyed him." Ruha's fingers finally managed to undo the rope around her ankles, but the witch made no move to escape. "He did not sink the ship—it did not appear that he was trying—but if you are still smuggling poisons for the cult, I do not understand why he attacked it at all."

The prince turned to his wife. "He wissshes to kill

Hsieh.t"

The princess promptly shook her head. "Cypress grows impatient. It isss only warning."

"What good is warning we do not hear about?" Tang countered. "He fearsss Hsieh comes to ssstop smuggling."

"How can Cypress know esssteemed mandarin is on Ginger Lady? Even we do not know until lassst week."

Tang considered Wei Dao's point for a moment; then the color came back to his face. He returned his attention to Ruha.

"I tell you about Cult of the Dragon." He lifted the chalice to her mouth. "Now you drink."

Ruha turned away from the awful smell. "You have not told me why you still fear
the cult, when you know I have already destroyed Cypress."

"Perhaps I do not believe you have." Tang swung the cup around to her lips.
"Drink."

This time, Ruha did not turn away. It seemed reasonable for Tang to assume she
might lie about destroying
Cypress, but she still had not discovered what the cult needed to complete the
theft of Yanseldara's spirit. She held her breath and, very briefly, touched her
lips to the cup rim—then pulled away and looked into the prince's eyes.

"Before drinking, I must be certain there is no hope of resolving our
differences. Allow me one more question."

Tang groaned and lowered the awful-smelling potion
"Ask."

"What more—"

Ruha's question was interrupted by the muffled barking of a Shou voice outside
the vault; then the steel door swung open. Into the chamber swept four men
wearing long, yellow hauberks of silk-jacketed scale armor.
Emblazoned on each of their chests was a scarlet wyvern, the personal crest of

the Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu.

Upon seeing the crest, both Tang and Wei Dao gasped.
The prince barely managed to stand by the time the minister's assistant, the
obsequious Yu Po, strode into the room. He stopped just inside the door and,
still flanked by Hsieh's guards, regarded Ruha's captors with a disdainful
sneer.

Yu Po tipped his body forward in a discourteously shallow bow. "/ am Yu Po,
Consssummate Scribe to Esssteemed
Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu."

The intrusion shocked Ruha as much as it did Tang and Wei Dao. The refinery
vault was hidden in a secret basement beneath the palace's great spicehouse.
Even had she anticipated Hsieh's arrival so early in the day, she would no more
have expected Yu Po to search out and intrude upon the prince and princess here
than in their private apartments.

"Welcome to Ginger Palace," said Tang, still holding the ylang potion. Both he
and his wife returned the scribe's bow with surprising deference. "We expect
Minister
Hsieh's arrival for many daysss now."

"We encounter many delay sss," Yu Po returned coldly.

"Pleassse excuse us," said Wei Dao. "We join esteemed

Mandarin in Hall of Amity, but firssst we must dispose of intruding thief."

Wei Dao waved a hand in Ruha's direction and drew an angry glare from Prince
Tang, who would no doubt now find it most awkward to present the witch to anyone

in Hsieh's party as either wife or concubine. Not knowing what else to do,
Ruha remained on her knees and pretended she was still bound. If escape had
looked barely feasible before, when she had to contend only with the lightning
fast reflexes of Tang and Wei Dao, it now seemed impossible.

Yu Po studied Ruha for a few moments; then, in Common, he said, "It is
difficult to say what Lady Ruha is, but it seems most unlikely she is thief."

"You know her?" Wei Dao gasped.

In the same instant, Prince Tang whirled on Ruha.
"Lady Ruha?" he demanded, looking hurt. "You do not tell me you are lady! Is it
custom where you come from to be one man's concubine and become another's wife?"

Yu Po arched his thin eyebrows. "First she is thief, then she is wife?" He
chuckled, then said, "So sorry, but wedding must wait." The adjutant motioned a
pair of guards toward Ruha.

Both Tang and Wei Dao paled and quickly stepped in front of

the witch. "She is
guest of Ginger Palace," Tang declared. "You may not take her without my
permission."

Yu Po's eyes grew as black as obsidian. "Then you come outside and explain this
to Minister Hsieh," the adjutant growled. "After treatment Esteemed Mandarin
receives from barbarians, he is most happy to hear that you defy him, I am
sure."

Tang glanced at his wife, then asked, "What barbarians?"

Yu Po's face darkened. "Vaerana Hawklyn and her company of knaves!" He was
sounding more angry all the time. "First they dare to surround Emperor's caravan
and search wagons for what they call 'contraband'—
Esteemed Mandarin is most interested to learn why Ministry of Spices does not
know of trade in oleander leaves and puffer fish venom—and now they insult
Emperor by holding Minister Hsieh hostage!"

"Hostage?" Tang gasped.

Yu Po nodded. "As we approach Ginger Palace, Lady

Ruha's half-man rushes down road and claims to Vaerana
Hawklyn that you abduct his mistress. Minister Hsieh promises her release, but
savage woman refuses his gracious offer and declares she

does not release
Emperor's caravan until witch is free."

Ruha cursed Vaerana for a meddling interloper. The
Lady Constable had just destroyed any hope that remained of discovering what the
cult needed to complete the theft ofYanseldara's spirit.

Yu Po glanced at Ruha's kneeling form, then leveled a stern gaze at Tang. "Do
you still wish to keep 'guest'
locked inside Ginger Palace?"

"No." The prince kneeled before Ruha and held the silver chalice to her lips.
"She is free to leave as soon as she drinks potion."

Ruha grimaced at the reek of the syrupy elixir. She took her hands from behind
her back and roughly pushed the cup away, then rose to her feet. "I have no wish
to drink that rancid stuff."

The jaws of both Tang and Wei Dao fell when they saw the seared bonds hanging
from her ankles and wrists.
The prince managed to recover his wits quickly enough to grab her arm and thrust
the potion toward her face.
"You break promise!"

"I said I would drink a potion of forgetfulness," Ruha snapped. "That is a love
potion, and I assure you that without fresh ylang blossoms, it could not
possibly be strong enough."

With that, the witch brushed past her astonished captors. She snatched herjambiya off a table, then stepped into the protection of Yu Po and his guards. "Will you please take me out of here?"

The adjutant waved her through the door. They climbed a set of stone stairs and exited the spicehouse via a secret door. With two guards leading the way and two following behind, the young Shou escorted Ruha past the enclosure where Tang kept his pet lizards, through a wicket door in the bulwark that separated the rear

grounds from those in front, and straight toward the main gates. As they walked, Yu Po said nothing and stared straight ahead, pretending not to see the many puzzled residents of the Ginger Palace who had gathered to watch them leave.

By the time they passed through the gateway, Ruha had untied her veil and fastened it back into place over her face. She found Vaerana and Fowler, now dressed in his customary trousers and tunic, waiting for her on the portico. The Lady Constable glowered at Ruha, then took her by the arm and hustled her down the stairs toward the white-bricked avenue, where a long line of driverless

wagons stood drawn up alongside the ginkgo forest. Minister Hsieh and the
caravan drivers were huddled together on the opposite side of the road,
surrounded by a
circle of mounted Maces.

As soon as their feet touched the white bricks, Vaerana released Ruha and glared
down at Yu Po—she was a full head taller than most of the Shou. "Wait here. I'll
send
Minister Hsieh along when I'm sure the witch is
unharmed."

"That is not our agreement."

"All right—I'll let the mandarin go when I'm good and ready," Vaerana growled.
"If you don't like that, go back and fetch your little prince. I'll trade Hsieh
for him anytime."

Yu Po's nostrils flared ever so slightly, but he bowed and did his best to
conceal his outrage.

The Lady Constable led the way a short distance down the white-bricked avenue,
and then, a dozen paces before they reached Tombor and the horses, suddenly
stopped.
She grabbed Ruha's arm and, unable to control her anger another moment, dragged
the witch off the road. With
Fowler following close behind, the two women slipped

between two driverless
wagons and walked twenty paces into the forest, where the fan-leafed ginkgo
trees were so thick that it would be impossible for anyone on the road—Shou or
otherwise—to see or hear what passed

between them.

"This is worse than Voonlar!" Vaerana hissed. "Couldn't you spend even one night
without getting caught? I
almost didn't make it back in time to save you."

"I did not need to be saved!" Arguing with the Lady
Constable would do little to improve her standing with the Harpers, but she was
as angry as Vaerana—and with better reason. "Yu Po could not have arrived at a
worse time."

"I suppose Prince Tang was going to hand the staff over?" Vaerana tugged
derisively at the heavy cloth of
Ruha's aba. "And what's this? Is this what you think a
Sembite spice trader looks like?"

"I know less about Sembite spice traders than you do about good manners," Ruha
shot back. "It was better to pose as someone I could impersonate."

Vaerana narrowed her eyes and moved forward until she was standing chin-to-chin
with the witch. "We found out in Voonlar what happens when

you think. You
should've done what I said."

Fowler slipped an arm between Vaerana and Ruha. "If she'd done what you wanted,
we'd still be sitting in the courtyard with that back-stabbing dwarf Tombor
claimed was a guide." The captain pushed the women apart, then interposed
himself between them. "It was only the Lady
Witch's disguise and her quick thinking that got us invited to stay the night at
all."

Vaerana's eyes widened at the rebuke. Her cheeks turned crimson and she dropped
her eyes in embarrassment. "I shouldn't be sharpening my blade on you, Witch.
Whatever happened, your life was the one at risk." She backed away and said,
"Why don't you tell us what happened?"

Ruha glanced at Fowler. "I do not know how much the captain could tell you—"

"Not much," Fowler interjected. "I waited all night for you to come back and
started to worry when you didn't return before dawn. Then the Shou went crazy,
running

all over swinging their boarding pikes around like they were trying to cut up
the air, and I knew they had to be looking for you. I cut a hole through the

roof of the guest house, then climbed over the wall and ran for the trees.
Sorry I didn't stay, but I wasn't going to be much help."

"You made the right choice," Ruha replied. "And matters did not go so badly."

Vaerana's eyes lit up. "Then you know where the staff is?"

Ruha shook her head. "I am sorry. But I do know it is not inside the Ginger Palace."

A dark curtain descended over Vaerana's face. "Not inside? But it's Shou magic
stealing Yanseldara's spirit—
my sages are sure of it!"

"Yes, and Prince Tang's mother is casting the spell, as you suspected," Ruha
said. "But Lady Feng has been
abducted."

"Someone stole her?" Fowler's tone was incredulous.

"From the Ginger Palace?"

Ruha nodded, then described all that she had discovered, from Lady Feng's
starving familiar to Prince Tang's unwitting enrollment in the Cult of the
Dragon.

Vaerana listened rather impatiently until the witch finished, then regarded her
with a thoughtful expression.

"It looks like I owe you an apology—if you're sure of this."

"Of everything I have described, yes," Ruha replied.
"But I do not understand why the cult is going to all this trouble to steal
Yanseldara's spirit. Wouldn't it have been simpler for them just to kill her?"

Vaerana made a half-nod. "Sure, but then they wouldn't rule Elversult. If they
control Yanseldara, they
control the city."

Though not entirely satisfied with Vaerana's explanation, Ruha lacked a better
one and saw no use in jeopardizing their developing truce by contradicting the
Lady

Constable.

"Assuming you are correct, the cult may be further
from its goal than we think," Ruha said. 'To complete the

theft ofYanseldara's spirit, the Cult of the Dragon needs something more from
Prince Tang."

"What?" Vaerana demanded, once again sounding impatient

and pushy. "If we deny them, can we stop Yanseldara from getting any sicker?"

"I could not learn the answer to either of your questions." Ruha looked away from Vaerana's disappointed face, restraining the urge to add that the Lady Constable's'rescue' had ruined her chances of discovering more. "The cult could need anything: an instrument from Lady Feng's apartment, ingredients from the palace's warehouse, perhaps something from Yanseldara's home."

"No, nothing from Moonstorm House," Vaerana objected. "They wouldn't have one chance in ten thousand of getting anything from there."

"How do you suppose they got her staff?" asked Fowler.

Vaerana shot the half-ore a murderous glare, then turned back to Ruha without answering his question.
"Your mission wasn't a total loss, Witch," she said, trying to be magnanimous and failing miserably. "At least you gave me some idea of what I'll need to ask."

"Ask?" Fowler grunted. "If you're thinking what I'm thinking you are, I want my gold now."

Vaerana frowned at the half-ore. "I can't pay out of Elversult's treasury. You'll get your gold after we take the

palace."

"You intend to storm the Ginger Palace?" Ruha gasped.

"Can you think of a better way to get my hands on Tang?"

Ruha shook her head. "No, but I doubt interrogating him will do you any good. The prince is too afraid of Cypress. He refuses to believe I destroyed the dragon."

"Well, you did," Vaerana growled. "Hsieh will tell him that!"

"Somehow, I do not think it will matter." Ruha thought for a moment, trying to recall Tang's exact words when she told him she had destroyed the dragon. "He said 'Perhaps you do destroy Cypress, but if you think that means there is no reason to fear him, you know nothing.' I thought he was referring to the Cult of the Dragon, but now that I reconsider…"

"Something strange is happening," Vaerana agreed. "I've heard reports that the cult's paying good gold to fishermen for tiny pieces of that dragon you killed."

"That'll hardly drain their treasure boxes," Fowler observed. "The sharks got most of the carcass."

Vaerana nodded. "For nearly a tenday now, the cult's been

shipping wagon-loads
of shark out of Pros, but none of it ever shows up in Elversult."

"Where could it be going?" Ruha asked.

Vaerana shrugged. "With all that's going on, I didn't think it was worth the
trouble of tracking down. Maybe I
was wrong."

"That'd be a good idea," Fowler said. "Cypress might not be as gone as we
thought."

Tombor the Jolly came stomping through the trees.
"Vaerana, the Shou want their mandarin. Archers are beginning to gather along
the walls."

"Let them!" Vaerana turned to go back to the road.
"We're going to have a battle soon enough."

Ruha grabbed the Lady Constable by the arm. "But the Shou do not have
Yanseldara's staffi"

"They're still my best hope of stopping the cult—or
Cypress—and saving Yanseldara."

"I may know of a better way," Ruha said, thinking of
Lady Feng's abandoned familiar. "Give me another day, and I will find Tang's
mother—and Yanseldara's staff."

Vaerana shook her head. "I don't know if Yanseldara has

another day—and even if she does, Elversult may not. The Cult of the Dragon is growing more powerful by the hour."

"How long'll it take you to storm the palace?" Fowler asked. "And even if it's less than a day, can you be sure Tang will tell you what you want to know—or that it'll do you much good?"
{Vaerana looked to Tombor. "What do you think?"

The cleric's gaze darted from Fowler to Ruha to Vaerana. Finally, he smiled and shrugged amiably. "It's all the same to me. I just need to know what you're doing."

Vaerana bit her lip, then finally said, "Tell Hsieh that he's free to go." After Tombor left, the Lady Constable gently took Ruha's arm and, in a tone that was almost pleading, said, "Witch, you can't foul this up."

"I shall not." Ruha glanced toward the road to make certain that she was still shielded from the view of any Shou, then whispered the incantation of the same sun spell she had used to vanish the day before. A shimmering wave of heat rolled down her body, leaving both her clothes and her flesh as transparent as air. "Just give me until tomorrow at dawn."

With that, the invisible witch returned to the road, where Tombor was just giving the order to release Hsieh and the caravan drivers. She went to the nearest wagon and raised the edge of its tarp just far enough to slip inside, and nearly gagged on the cloying odor that rose from the cargo box: fresh ylang blossoms.

Nine

The servants had brought a small, triangular table of polished mahogany into the Hall of Amity and placed three teak thrones around it. Prince Tang and his wife sat close together on one side, staring at their reflections in the burnished surface, and Minister Hsieh _____sat alone at the opposite point. The shape of the table represented the trio's nominal equality as members of the Imperial Household of Shou Lung, the seating arrangement reflected their actual status in the Emperor's eyes, and the absence of any guards except the minister's was a concession to his office: only the Emperor himself could bring personal guards into the presence of

a mandarin.

"Why does table have only three sides?" Hsieh demanded. "Where is Lady Feng?"

The knot in Tang's stomach tightened even further, but he forced himself to
slacken his face muscles and meet the mandarin's eyes. "Lady Feng is not here."

The mandarin accepted the prince's nonanswer with stern inexpressiveness. "Is
most worthy concubine available? I travel many thousands ofli to speak to
her."

The prince hazarded a glance at his wife, whose face remained as unreadable as
the mandarin's. They had not expected this. Though Hsieh and Lady Feng were
cousins, they disliked each other vehemently and had taken pains

to avoid each other for years. It was even whispered that, after some incident
involving Lady Feng*s familiar, it had been the mandarin who had arranged the
exile of the
Third Virtuous Concubine.

At last, Wei Dao asked, "You have nothing to say to
Honored Husband?"

Hsieh regarded the prince and princess in thoughtful silence, until a smirk of
amusement flickered briefly across his lips. "No, to surprise of everyone in
Hall of
Supreme Harmony, profits of Ginger Palace are most

satisfying. Even Emperor
notice."

Tang's stomach started to writhe and chum. The good news would only make it more
difficult to admit that he had allowed someone to kidnap the Third Virtuous Con
cubine.

"Do not look so troubled, Prince. We will talk after I
see Lady Feng." Hsieh's uncovered eye narrowed in mild rebuke. "I am most
anxious to hear why Ministry of
Spices does not know about Ginger Palace's poison trade."

Tang rose and accepted the mandarin's admonishment with a polite bow. "I am most
anxious to make report on anything you wish." He fixed his eyes on the silver
trimmed hem of the mandarin's maitung, then took a deep breath and forced
himself to speak again. "But first,
I must relate regrettable truth about Lady Feng."

Even a seasoned bureaucrat like Minister Hsieh could not prevent the blood from
draining from his face, thereby betraying his shock. "Something has happened?"

Wei Dao was on her feet and speaking before Tang could continue. "When Prince
Tang says Lady Feng is not here, he means not in Ginger Palace."

Hsieh's jaw fell, and when his brow furrowed this time, the rebuke was not a

gentle one. "Then where is Third
Virtuous Concubine?"

Again, Wei Dao answered for her husband. "She tends to sick friend in
Elversult."

The mandarin scowled and, apparently resigning him-

self to having all his questions answered by the princess, turned directly to
Wei Dao.

"It is most indecorous to have Emperor's consort wandering about outside her
palace, especially in land of barbarians." Though his face showed no sign of
emotion, there was a dubious edge in his voice. "Why not bring sick friend to
Ginger Palace?"

"Friend is too sick to move."

Hsieh's eyes narrowed; then he whirled back to Prince

Tang. "Who is this friend?"
"Very important—"
Hsieh raised his hand to silence the princess. "I ask
honorable husband."

Tang glanced at his wife, who wisely made no attempt to communicate what she had
intended to say. Though the mandarin's gaze was riveted on the prince, his adju

tant was watching Wei Dao from the comers of his eyes.

Tang could not bring himself to answer. He was too blinded by fear to see the escape toward which Wei Dao had been driving. Lying to a mandarin was both a crime as terrible as treason and an indelible stain on the honor of his ancestors, yet now that his wife had shown him the way, he wanted nothing more than to avoid admitting his ignoble failure.

"Who is Lady Feng'8 friend?" Hsieh demanded.

Tang realized that his wife could have intended to give only one answer. "Lady Feng visits Moonstorm House in Elversult." The prince felt as though he would retch; his stomach was turning somersaults and his jaws were aching. "Queen of city is very ill, and her priests ask for help of Third Virtuous Concubine."

Hsieh's face did not soften. "Then why does constable woman harass Shou caravan? Making hostage of Emperor's servant is poor way to show appreciation."

As badly as he wanted to, the prince did not look toward Wei Dao. Certainly, she had already thought of an answer to this simple question, but the mere hint of coaching from her would be enough to condemn both

Tang and his wife to slow and dishonorable deaths.

"Barbarians have strange customs." Tang knew that his response was a feeble one,
but he needed time to think of something better. "Vaerana Hawklyn does not trust
afterworld magic and accuses us of causing her queen's illness."

"Have we?"

Tang tried to swallow and found that he could not.
"Why do you think that, Minister?"

The minister splayed his fingers, then began to tick off the names of poisonous
plants that had been hidden in the Ginger Lady's cargo. "Oleander... lantana...
castor bean... pink pea... Shou berry." He reached his little finger and stopped.
"Need I go on?"

Prince Tang shook his head. "We only sell poisons, not use them. Yanseldara's
condition is not our fault."

Hsieh lowered his hand. "You know I do not care if it is, as long as your reason
is good. But if you are lying—"

"Never!" Both Tang and his wife spoke at once.

Hsieh raised a cautionary finger and continued, "If you lie to protect Lady
Feng, I have no mercy."

Tang's head began to spin. "To protect Lady Feng?" he asked, truly confused.
"How does lying—"

"We do not lie." Wei Dao stepped around the table to her husband's side. "We
send a company of guards to inform Lady Feng of your arrival. Perhaps you wish
to send Yu Po along?"

Hsieh considered the offer, then shook his head. "That is not necessary. If
there is anything I should know, it is certain to come to light."

The mandarin rose and honored them with a shallow bow, then led Yu Po and his
guards from the room. As soon as their steps faded from the corridor outside,
Tang sent the servants away.

"Why do you lie to mandarin?" he demanded, turning to his wife. "You dishonor
ancestors and condemn us to
Chamber of Agonizing Death!"

"Only if Minister Hsieh discovers abduction of venerable mother."

"How can he fail?" Tang's legs were trembling. It made him feel ashamed and
weak. "Any servant tells esteemed mandarin everything he wants to know."

"True, but Minister Hsieh is sure to ask wrong questions," Wei Dao replied
calmly. "He thinks venerable mother has lover, and any servant he asks certainly
tells
him that is nonsense."

The princess's reassurance did little to bolster Tang's courage. "But how do
guards bring Lady Feng home from
Moonstorm House? Cypress has mother, not Vaerana

Hawklyn!"

"Yes, but now we have fresh ylang blossoms." Wei Dao grabbed her husband by the
wrist and started toward the back of the palace. "Now come. We have no more time
for your cowardice—or your foolishness."

**if!S):*

Inside the cargo box, the thick stench of ylang blossoms did more to muffle
the unexpected shriek than the canvas tarp—or so it seemed to Ruha. The first
screech was instantly followed by more cries from all corners of the cavernous
spicehouse, and then came a brief stampede of drumming boots. Wisps of another
smell, rancid and even more cloying than ylang oil, drifted through the gaps
between the wagon's sideboards. After that, the cavernous spicehouse fell
silent, leaving the witch to wonder if, after untold hours of

stillness, she
dared uncurl herself
and peek outside.

Ruha decided to wait; ten heartbeats, twenty, thirty.
She had thought it would be a simple thing to stow away until the wagon was
inside the palace, then slip out from beneath the tarp when it was parked to
await unloading.
But the Shou had driven the witch's wagon and several others into the shady
coolness of the spicehouse and left them there, then began to unpack the
vehicles parked outside in the hot sun. Until now, the patter of feet passing
by her hiding place had been so steady that she had

hardly dared to breathe, much less poke her head out from beneath the tarp.

Ruha's count reached a hundred. She slowly uncurled herself, taking a moment to
stretch her stiff muscles in case she suddenly had to run or fight, then
half-swam through the dried blossoms to the back corner of the wagon. In the
inky darkness beneath the tarp, her sun spell had grown weak and expired some
time ago, leaving her as visible as any workman. She used the tip of her jambiya
to lift the tarp, then raised her head high enough to peer over the tail boards.

A gasp of surprise rose into her throat and escaped, half-

strangled, from her
mouth. Less than five paces away sat a small black dragon. Save that it was no
larger than a cargo wagon, the creature was identical to
Cypress, with the same dull scales, splintered horns, and sinister voids where
his eyes should have been. The foul odor she had smelled earlier seemed to be
coming from the carcass, and now the witch thought she could identify the
stench: rotten fish.

Ruha dropped back into the wagon and tried not to choke on her own heart, which
had somehow climbed high into her throat. When the creature did not immedi
ately come tearing through the tarp, the witch dared to hope it had not seen her
and frantically tried to think of some reason that did not involve her that it
might be waiting outside her wagon. She failed, rather quickly, and started to
consider what she might do about the situation.

Come out, my dear. Though the voice reverberated through Ruha's head without
passing through her ears, it sounded as raspy and chilling as the first time she
had heard it. You have no idea how I have been looking forward to our second
meeting.

Ruha knew then that someone had betrayed her, but who: Vaerana or Fowler? The
thought was ludicrous.
They both had more reason than she to hate Cypress, yet

who else could have
known where she was hiding? Any-

one they would have trusted with the secret. In Vaerana's case, at least,
that circle was no doubt larger than
the witch would have liked.

Come out and give me that silver I smell in your pocket.
If you show that much courage, perhaps I will have mercy.

A prickling chill ran down Ruha's back, and a terrifying possibility occurred
to her. I have seen your mercy, she thought. And you have seen my magic. Go
away, or it will
be you who begs quarter.

The witch waited a moment for Cypress's response.
When none came, she breathed a little easier. If the dragon had been able to
read her thoughts, her chances of surviving the coming battle would have fallen
to nothing.

Ruha sheathed her dagger, then burrowed into the ylang blossoms. She crawled
toward the front of the cargo box, taking care not to jiggle the wagon. As she
moved, she summoned the incantation of a fire spell to mind. She doubted that
she could trick Cypress into swallowing a chestful of oil vapor again, but

neither would it take such a huge explosion to destroy his new body. A smaller
blast, properly placed, would prove sufficient to annihilate him.

The witch was only halfway to her goal when something jolted the wagon. She
heard the zip-zip of oilcloth being ripped; then a flickering yellow light of
the spicehouse's oil lamps filtered down through the ylang blossoms. Already
uttering her incantation, Ruha lifted herself out of the blossoms and, expecting
to feel the dragon's claws driving deep into her flesh at any moment, thrust her
hand over the sideboard.

The flames shot off the wicks of half a dozen different lamps and streaked into
the palm other hand, gathering themselves into a hissing, sputtering ball of
fire. She whirled around, ready to slap the scorching sphere into
Cypress's empty eye socket or beneath his arm, or anywhere that would channel
the explosion into her
attacker's vital areas.

The dragon was not there. He stood three paces away

from the wagon, the dark voids beneath his brow fixed on the fire in Ruha's
palm. From his talons hung the remains of the shredded tarp, and she could see
the tip of his tail flicking back and forth behind his head. He

made no move to
attack.

There's no need to burn down poor Tang's spicehouse, the dragon said. Step out
of the wagon. Give me that sil.
uer I smell and answer a single question. I promise, your death shall be
mercifully quick.

Ruha felt as though the fire in her hand was cooking her bone marrow as far down
as her elbow, but she made no move to throw the fireball. Without being properly
placed, the blast would do no more than melt a few of the dragon's scales.
Besides, as much as the searing heat grieved her, the sphere could cause her no
real damage until after it left her hand.

"I have known enough pain in my life not to be frightened of it," Ruha said.
"If I am to die, I do not particularly care whether it is quickly or slowly."

As the witch spoke, she stepped over to Cypress's side of the wagon. To her
surprise, the dragon moved neither away from the fireball nor forward to attack.
Ruha might have been able to reach the dragon with a good leap, but he would
have time to turn away and, in all likelihood, impale her on his long talons. If
her plan was to succeed, she had to draw him closer.

"You may ask your question. Perhaps I will answer, or

perhaps I will not."

You will answer. Cypress promised. And you will step out of the wagon.

"Why is it so important that I leave the wagon? I can answer your question from
here."

In the black depths of the dragon's empty eye sockets appeared two dirty yellow
sparks. When we met the first time, was it happenstance? As Cypress asked his
question, the sparks lengthened into gleaming lines, then began to flicker at
the ends and thicken into stripes. Or did someone tell you I would be there?

"Who would have told me that?" Ruha wanted nothing more than to hurl her
fireball at the dragon and run for her life, but she forced herself to stand
fast. If Cypress bad not attacked by now, then it had to be because he was
afraid of destroying what was in the wagon. The witch tipped her hand so that
the fireball was precariously close to slipping from her palm, then added,
"And stop what you are—"

You will not drop the fireball!

The yellow stripes shot from Cypress's vacant eyes and joined together, becoming
a long-fanged bat of amber light. Ruha brought her hand

around, placing the
fireball between herself and her attacker.

Stupid Harper! Flames will not save you!

The bat emerged from the fireball, its wings blazing and its eyes glowing with
rabid fury. Ruha reached for herjambiya, and the beast was upon her. Instead of
raking her eyes with its tiny claws or sinking its fangs into her throat, it
appeared inside her mind, a flaming creature of the night, flitting across the
starry sky high over her memories ofAnauroch's purple-shadowed sand dunes.

Ruha cried out, but she could not bring herself to flee the dragon, or even to
turn away. Cypress was already inside her mind, and trying break contact with
him was as futile as trying to escape an unpleasant memory by closing one's
eyes. The dragon sat motionless on the floor, his gaze pinning the witch in
place as surely as if he had been standing on her chest.

Her only chance of escaping, Ruha realized, lay in distracting Cypress. No
sooner did she have this thought than a small brake of saltbush sprouted from
the sands other mind. The words of a wind spell rose from the brush like a swarm
of sand finches. Cypress's fiery bat streaked down to dive through the heart of
the flock, scattering the syllables of the incantation before they could shape

themselves. Ruha's arm remained motionless, the fireball still burning in her
hand.

Cypress's bat settled on the surface of Ruha's mind and began to beat its
burning wings. Clouds of hissing yellow fume curled from the tips of the fiery
appendages and rolled across the dune-sculpted terrain. Wherever the haze
touched, the sands themselves melted into rivers and pools of bubbling brown
acid. The witch started to feel hot and limp, as though a fever had taken hold
of her body, and her limbs trembled with weakness.
For a moment, she feared she had guessed wrong about the dragon's fear of
destroying the ylang blossoms, that he merely wanted her to drop the fireball at
her own feet.

The bubbling brown pools inside Ruha's head joined and became a lake. The bat
dove into the acid, sinking its fangs deep into the throat of some naked thought
that was writhing just below the surface other mind. The witch saw Cypress's
lips curl into something that resembled a smile; then she felt her foot
sliding across the floor of the wagon. She tried to stop, but no sooner had the
thought taken shape than it dissolved into nothingness in the bubbling acid.
The dragon had won control of her mind, and now she had to

fight him not only
for her life, but for the possession other own thoughts.

It occurred to Ruha that this was a battle not of strength or speed, but of
imagination, and a rocky island of hope instantly sprang up inside her mind.

Waves of acid began to lap at its shores, filling the air with hissing white
smoke and reducing the isle to little more than a sandbar. The witch pictured
the sand changing to granite. She felt a strange tingling deep within her
stomach, then experienced a momentary burning all over her body, as though she
had exerted every muscle at once. The little island hardened into dense stone
and stopped dissolving, but Ruha felt her foot slide a little closer to the rear
of the wagon.

A deep-throated growl rumbled from Cypress's throat;
then the yellow acid inside Ruha's mind began to churn and froth like a
storm-tossed sea. Mountainous waves rose and crashed over the witch's small
isle, threatening

to submerge it entirely. She envisioned the island erupting like a volcano,
pushing its way higher above the surface and spreading immense blankets of
molten stone across the lake. Again, she experienced a strange tingling deep
within her abdomen, followed by a momentary burning over

her entire body. She felt physically drained, as though she had been running for a long time in the scorching sun.

You only anger me. Cypress's voice broke like thunder inside Ruha's mind, and she felt her foot touch the wagon's tailgate. Are untrained mind cannot prevail.

The stars vanished from the purple sky over the witch's growing island of hope. Spears of lightning stabbed at the summit of the erupting volcano, and a few hissing drops of acid began to fall on its slopes.

Then, before Cypress could unleash the full fury of his storm, a pair of familiar forms came rushing across the spicehouse floor.

"Cypress!" gasped Wei Dao. "What do you want here?"

Prince Tang drew his sword and pointed it at the dragon. "You go!" Then he looked toward the door.

"Guards!"

Cypress glanced away from Ruha long enough to flick his tail at the approaching prince and send him crashing through the flimsy door of a spice bin. That instant was long enough for the witch. She envisioned her volcano bursting apart, flinging lava and ash in all directions. A

tremendous wave of fatigue rolled over her body; then her island erupted as she

had envisioned, pouring forth molten stone in such prodigious quantities that
the acid lake completely vanished beneath its fiery blanket.

Ruha felt control of her limbs return. Gasping for breath and trembling with
fatigue, she slipped back to the center of the wagon. Her mind was not entirely
free of its attacker, however. The dragon locked gazes with her again, and once
more his bat figure appeared inside her mind, rising from beneath the sea of
flaming rock like a phoenix reborn. An angry rumble rolled from

Cypress's throat; then the flaming bat transformed itself into an immense,
black-haired Cyclops. The brute floated down to the ground, then waded through
the lava toward the witch's volcano. He stood as tall as the summit, and his
knobby hands looked powerful enough to crush stone.

Ruha pictured the ground beneath his feet turning to quicksand, but this time
she experienced no strange tinglings in the pit other stomach. She felt only a
dull, nauseating ache, then a searing wave of pain as the last of her energy
drained from her muscles. The witch collapsed to her knees, so exhausted and
enervated that she could not find the strength to rise. The cyclops stopped

beside her volcano, then reached out and tore away a huge chunk of glowing
stone.

As I annihilate this mountain, so I annihilate your mind! the cyclops cackled.
When I finish, your head will be naught but a smoking hole, as empty and useless
as a spent sulfur pit!

Ruha tried again to change the scene inside her head, but succeeded only in
exhausting herself to the point that she almost dropped the fireball. The wagon
rocked as someone climbed in behind her, but the witch could not rip her gaze
away from Cypress's empty eye sockets to see who it was. She thought about
trying to drop the fireball before the dragon seized control of her body
again.
The resulting conflagration would kill her as well as the newcomer, but she felt
fairly certain that destroying the ylang blossoms would also delay the theft
ofYanseldara's spirit.

Prince Tang kneeled beside Ruha, holding several slender yellow leaves in his
hand. His eyes appeared glassy and vacant, and he seemed to be chewing some
thing. Cypress glanced away from Ruha and glared at
Tang. Inside the witch's mind, the cyclops stopped tearing apart her volcano.
She was too exhausted to take advantage of her foe's distraction, but she found

herself free to look away from his gaze. A small company of Shou guards had
appeared at the door and were cautiously

advancing into the shadowy spicehouse, squinting at the dragon as though they
could not quite believe their sundazzled eyes.

Whatever the dragon said to Tang, Ruha could not hear it, but the prince's
response was short and angry:

"No. If you want oil, you leave now—or I burn wagon myself." Tang raised one of
the slender leaves to Ruha's lips, then instructed, "Chew leaf, wu-jen."

Ruha clenched her teeth and considered thrusting her fireball into Tang's face.
"Trust me. This no love potion. It is lasal. Leaf protects against Invisible Art."

Ruha allowed the prince to slip the leaf into her mouth and began to chew. The
wail of a distant wind arose inside her mind, and the cyclops slowly turned
toward the sound. Cypress glanced at Wei Dao, who immediately stepped to the
wagon side and spoke to her husband in
Shou. The prince responded sharply and pointed toward the guards, who were
advancing on the unconcerned dragon with polearms leveled for battle. They
seemed rather unsteady on their feet, and even from halfway across the

spicehouse, their eyes appeared more glassy than Tang's.

Inside Ruha's mind, the wail of the wind became a roar, then a howling sand cloud billowed across the boiling plain. Cypress groaned, and the cyclops turned to face the storm. The brute took a deep breath and began to blow, but his breath was no match for the fury of the gale. The sand blasted over him, and he vanished into the tempest.

Cypress grunted, his empty-eyed head recoiling as though the storm had struck him physically. He backed away from the wagon, trembling and sputtering and madly scratching at his temples. Tang's guards charged, filling the spicehouse with a tremendous clamor as their blades struck their foe's impenetrable scales. Several of the blades snapped on impact, but most either bounced off or became lodged without causing any damage. The

dragon lashed out with fangs, claws, and tail, littering the floor with the shattered bodies of Tang's loyal guards.

Finding herself completely in control of her own body—if somewhat exhausted and fuzzy-headed—Ruha rose to her feet and swung a leg over the side of the wagon.

"No!" Wei Dao shrieked.

The princess leapt toward Ruha, causing the witch to hesitate just long enough
for Tang to grab her by the shoulder.

"If you leave wagon, we all die." The prince's words were slurred, and he seemed
to be having trouble focusing his eyes. "Only fear of burning blossoms saves
us now."

"I know that." Ruha scowled, struggling against the roaring storm in her head to
remember why she had decided to throw the fireball in the first place. "But I
must attack… while we have the advantage."

You have nothing.

Cypress cast aside the bodies of two more guards, then pointed his long snout in
Tang's direction. The dragon was far from destroyed, but he looked as haggard as
Ruha, and more than a few of his thick scales had been pulled or cut away. Tang
called something to his surviving guards, who looked rather relieved and
backed away.

"But wu-jen is under my protection," the prince said, speaking in Common.

Your protection? This time, Ruha heard Cypress—though whether it was intended or
an accident of his anger, she did not know. She is a Harper,

sent to take
Yanseldara away from me!

Tang cringed at the dragon's anger, but did not back down. "Nevertheless, while
she remains in Ginger
Palace, she is under my protection." The prince glanced at his battered guards
and nodded once. They leveled their weapons and took a single step forward. "If
you do not agree, we finish this now—and you lose Yanseldara anyway."

"Are you mad. Husband?" Wei Dao cried. "Give him

barbarian! She causes too much trouble already."

Tang glared at Wei Dao. "I hear enough from you, Wife.
I am Prince of Shou Lung, and to call me mad is treason."

Wei Dao's face darkened to an angry ocher, but she obediently lowered her gaze
and mumbled, "Please to forgive outburst, Merciful Husband."

Cypress observed the exchange in silence, then pointed his snout in Tang's
direction. Why all this trouble for a barbarian, Young Prince? he demanded,
still allowing
Ruha to eavesdrop. Could it be you have fallen in love?

"That is not your concern," Tang replied. "I have ylang oil by evening. Please
to bring Lady Feng, and we make

exchange."

Cypress stepped forward, bringing his nostrils almost to within arm's reach of
Ruha. You are fortunate that I
understand the power of love. Harper. Treat Tang well.

You owe him your life.

Ruha brought her fireball around. So exhausted was
Cypress that he barely pulled his head away in time to keep her from stuffing
the sphere into his nostrils.

"I'll treat Tang as well as he deserves, I assure you."

Ruha said.
The dragon backed away and swung his snout toward

Tang.

The prince listened for a moment, then pointed to the door. "You bring Lady
Feng. I see to wu-jen."

Cypress allowed his empty gaze to linger on Ruha for a moment, then turned away.
With a weary beat of his wings, he lifted himself into the air and flew out the
door.
Tang waited until he was gone, then turned to Ruha.

"Perhaps now you understand wisdom of my actions."
The prince's voice was smug and condescending. "Or do you still believe Cypress
is destroyed?"

Ruha shook her head. "I do not—but how could he have survived?" The lasal haze inside her mind was already beginning to clear, but it had not yet grown thin enough for her to understand what she had seen. "I blasted him into a thousand pieces."

"You destroy body, not spirit," Tang explained, assuming a superior air. "Cypress is dracolich. He hides spirit inside gem—"

"Wise Prince," Wei Dao interrupted. "Cypress says she is Harper. Is it prudent to tell her so much?"

By the scowl Tang shot nis wife, Ruha could see that the prince wanted to impress her with his proscribed knowledge—and she wanted him to. The witch allowed an expectant gaze to linger on the prince's face for a moment, then rolled her eyes and looked away, letting out a deliberately loud sigh of disgust.

The silent put-down worked as no verbal upbraid could have. Tang's face reddened, and he snapped at Wei Dao, "I decide what is prudent!" When the princess lowered her gaze, Tang looked back to Ruha. "Cypress hides his spirit inside gem. After his body is destroyed, he possesses new corpse and consumes old one."

"But the sharks ate his old one," Ruha said, thinking aloud. "And that is why he
smells like rotten fish now. He is eating the creatures that ate him!"

Tang nodded. "It is impossible to stop process. Even if you burn old corpse and
spread ashes, he can find them and swallow them. When he has eaten enough, he
becomes dracolich again."

"How close is he now?"

Tang shrugged. "It does not matter to you. For your protection, I must not allow
you to leave Ginger Palace."

"Is that by Cypress's command, or yours?"

"By dragon's—and he warns me you have no gratitude.
He says you do not repay my bravery as woman should."

Ruha's eyes narrowed. "And how is that?"

The prince smiled. "Ginger Palace still has need ofwujen. Our union would be
most blissful."

"Prince Tang, that will never be," Ruha said, speaking sharply. She climbed out
of the wagon and moved several paces away. "But I have a better way to show my
gratitude. I shall let you leave the wagon before I throw my fireball into
it."

In the blink of an eye, Ruha was surrounded by Tang's battered and bloodied
guards, each holding a long-bladed halberd or square-tipped sword within an inch
other body. Wei Dao stood behind them, looking more than a little disappointed
that she had not been able to draw her dagger quickly enough to kill the witch
before her husband's soldiers got in the way.

Tang eyed the witch's fireball and did not climb from the wagon. "Burning
blossoms would be unfortunate mistake for all concerned—especially
Yanseldara."

Though the heat of the fireball felt as though it were melting her arm, Ruha
stopped short of flinging it into the wagon. "Do not lie to me. I heard you say
this morning that Cypress needs something more from you to complete his
spell." The witch waved her flaming sphere toward the wagon. "It seems obvious
enough that what he needs is fresh ylang oil."

"Yes, that is true." Tang scowled at Wei Dao and motioned for her to return her
dagger to its sheath.
"Cypress needs fresh ylang oil to make love spell."

"Love spell?" Ruha gasped.

"You know what ylang blossoms do," Tang replied. "You see that this morning."

"A dead dragon—a dracolich—wishes the love of a halfelf?"

Tang nodded. "He loves Yanseldara for many years, since she wounds him and sends
him away from Elversuit." Tang placed a hand over his heart. "Love unre
quited is most sad."

Wei Dao rolled her eyes, then gestured at the fireball still burning in Ruha's
palm. "We have no time for this foolishness, Wise Husband. Tell witch why she
cannot destroy ylang blossoms."

Tang looked into Ruha's eyes and, finding no sympathy there, reluctantly nodded.
"Very well. Love is matter of spirit. To save Yanseldara's spirit or to steal
it, same thing is needed—powerful love potion."

"Then there must be a difference in how it is used."

"It is not necessary that you know that," said Wei Dao.

The witch ignored Wei Dao and hefted her fireball.
"Perhaps you would prefer that I assume you are lying about the blossoms?"

Prince Tang looked genuinely hurt. "You call me liar? I
risk my life—life of royal Shou Prince—to save you, and this is how you repay my

love?"

Ruha lowered the fireball and used her free hand to snuff it out. She had learned all she was going to about the blossoms, and it was just enough to keep her from destroying the wagon.

"Prince Tang, you cannot love me, any more than Cypress loves Yanseldara." Ruha spoke softly, for her intention was more to explain than to hurt. "Only a man can love, and you have yet to become a man."

Tang leapt out of the wagon, pushing several guards aside as he stepped toward Ruha. "Shou prince becomes man in tenth year. I am man for twenty years!"

Ruha shook her head. "You want me because I deny you, and that is the emotion of a child, not a man."

Tang's face contracted into a shriveled mask of rage and pain. His mouth opened as though he were going to speak, but all that emerged was an unintelligible sputter.

Wei Dao stepped to the prince's side and took his arm. "She knows nothing. Great Prince."

The princess motioned to the guards and spoke in Shou. A pair of them sheathed their swords and seized Ruha by her arms. They started to drag her from the spicehouse, and Prince Tang

made no move to stop them.

Ruha glanced over her shoulder. "A man takes responsibility for his actions,
Prince Tang."

As she spoke, the witch tried to summon to mind the incantation of a wind spell
and discovered she could not.
Only the faintest hint of the lasal haze remained in her mind, but it was enough
to prevent her from using her magic.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the prince's face, Ruha continued, "A man does not
allow his fear to dictate his

actions, and a man does not hide his mistakes from those who can help him
correct them."

Prince Tang looked away, and Wei Dao urged, "Pay her no attention. After Lady
Feng is returned—"

"Returned?" Ruha snapped her arms free of her captors and spun around, then
found the tips of several halberds pressed against her body. She ignored them.
"Prince Tang, if you believe Cypress intends to return your mother, then you
truly are a child."

The guards seized Ruha's wrists and started to drag her away, until Tang spoke
to them in Shou. The two men stopped, but still grasped the

witch's arms so
tightly her bones ached.

"If he wants potion, Cypress must return Mother," said

Tang.

Ruha shook her head. "Does he not need her to cast the magic that will make
Yanseldara love him? And even if he can do it himself—which he cannot, or you
could not have been confident of her safety until now—remember why he attacked
the Ginger Lady. Does he not fear that
Hsieh intends to put someone else in charge of the Ginger Palace? Would Lady
Feng not make an excellent hostage to guarantee approval of the mandarin's
choice?"

Tang turned to his wife. They began to argue in Shou.

"You need help to recover your mother." Ruha spoke loudly to make herself heard
over the quarrel. "Admit that, and you have taken your first step to becoming a
man."

Tang jabbed his index finger against his wife's forehead and shouted something
angry at her, then whirled away and strode over to Ruha.

"I need no help to rescue Mother!" The prince glared at
Ruha for a moment, then stepped past her and started toward the door. "And I am
no child—I prove that soon enough!"

Ten

The dungeon beneath the Ginger Palace was unlike any of those dank, deep, dark places from which the Harpers had taught Ruha to escape. Instead of mildew and offal, it smelled of cedar and lamp oil, and the sound that filled its corridors was not the wail of tortured prisoners, but the silken swishing of Shou robes. The doors hung on brass hinges rather than leather straps, and they were made of red-lacquered mahogany instead of rusty iron—a construction that would make them no less sturdy once they were barred shut. The stone walls were smoothplastered, washed with white lime, and a foot thick; the ceiling, nearly fifteen feet above, was formed by the exposed underside of the floor planks above, and therein lay the only weakness Ruha could find.

The long procession of guards reached an intersection and, when Wei Dao attempted to turn right, came to a sudden halt. The leader of the soldiers spoke to the princess in Shou. She replied sharply and pointed at Ruha. The witch had again been gagged with her own veil, her arms were pinned behind her by two separate men, and she was surrounded

by a ring of warriors
holding naked sword blades within inches other throat.

Though the lasal haze had already faded from her mind, Ruha's escort had been
too attentive to allow her to

cast any spells, so she could not understand the conversation. Nevertheless,
she had explored the dungeon during her initial search for Yanseldara's staff
and could imagine what they were discussing. Down the left corridor lay the
palace's tidy prison cells; down the right lay the gruesome chambers of torture
and death, where there were certainly enough shackles, fetters, and jaw clamps
to keep even a wu-jen from escaping.

Wei Dao prevailed over the commander and led the column to the right. Ruha
brought a two-syllable sun spell to mind and, as the clumsy ensemble around her
struggled to turn the corner, pretended to stumble. The ring of swordsmen jerked
their blades back—Prince Tang had been most emphatic in saying he expected the
prisoner alive when he returned—and that was all the room the witch needed.

Slipping her gag as she had once before, Ruha picked her feet off the brick
floor and kicked them both backward. Only one of her heels landed on target,
smashing the knee of one of the guards holding her arms. The other missed its

mark and slipped between the fellow's legs. As she pitched forward, the witch
brought her foot up, catching the soldier squarely in the groin. Both men
screamed and released her arms, then landed beside her on the floor.

At once, Ruha rolled onto her side, looked toward one of the oil lamps hanging
on the wall, then closed her eyes, covered her ears, and uttered her spell.
There was an ear-splitting boom and a flash of light so brilliant it pained the
witch's eyes even through their closed lids.

The next thing Ruha knew, she was lying beneath a heap of writhing Shou guards.
If they were screaming, the witch could not hear them; the ringing in her own
ears was so loud she could not have heard a thunderclap breaking over her head.
Half expecting to feel a long steel blade driving between her ribs, she opened
her eyes and crawled from beneath the heap of soldiers.

The entire line of guards lay on the white bricks, their

open mouths voicing screams the witch could not hear.
Some of the men held their ears and some covered their eyes, but they all
remained too stunned to do more than writhe in pain. The oil lamp she had used
for her spell was gone, leaving a huge sooty smudge above the sconce where it
had hung, but neither the wall nor the ceiling had suffered

any material damage
from the detonation.

Ruha searched for Wei Dao's form at the head of the column, weighing the wisdom
of wading through the tangle of bodies to retrieve her late husband's jambiya
from the princess. Unfortunately, the witch could not be sure how soon her
captors would begin recovering from their shock. The effects would normally last
long enough for her to run an eighth league, but she had no way to tell how long
she herself had been incapacitated. Besides, there were a dozen more guards at
the entrance to the dungeon, and it would not be long before they arrived to
investigate the detonation.

Ruha pulled a dagger from a soldier's belt, then stepped over him and three
other quivering men and started down the left-hand corridor. As she moved, the
witch kept a careful watch on the floor, stopping to pry out any pebbles lodged
between bricks. It took only a few moments to fill her hand, for even the tidy
Shou could not keep from tracking tiny stones inside, and it hardly seemed worth
the effort to scrape them from the seams of a dungeon floor.

The witch glanced back down the corridor. Although
Wei Dao had not entirely recovered from her shock, she had risen and was picking
her way down the corridor.
The princess's eyes had the blank, inert stare of

sightlessness, and she was
moving her open hands in front of her body in an ever changing pattern of
circular motions.
Ruha found her pursuer's determination more than a little alarming; only a very
good fighter would feel confident enough to carry the battle to a foe while
both blind and deaf.

Ruha shook her pebbles and uttered the incantation of

a sand spell. The stones began to oscillate in her palm, scrubbing off two
layers of skin before she could hurl them at the ceiling. They struck in a
circle as broad as her shoulders and continued to vibrate, much too fast for the
eye to follow. She heard a faint drone above the ringing in her ears, and a
steady shower of powdered wood rained down on her shoulders. The witch hiked up
the hem of her aba, then pressed her hands and feet against opposite walls and
began to chimney up the walls of the corridor.

Ruha had climbed about ten feet when Wei Dao passed beneath her, still circling
her hands before her body and staring vacantly ahead. The drone of the sand
spell must have been loud enough for the princess to hear, for she stopped
directly beneath the scouring pebbles and cocked her head. She turned her palm
up to catch some of the powdered wood raining down her, then seemed to guess

what was happening and started after the witch.

Ruha climbed to the ceiling and waited beside her circle of buzzing pebbles. The stones had dug a deep labyrinth of wormy grooves into the wood, and it would not be much longer before they scoured clear through. Already, islands of plank were trembling as though they would fall at any moment, but the witch did not dare reach up to pull them loose. The whirling pebbles would take her fingers off.

A short distance below, Wei Dao had nearly climbed within arm's reach. She carried Ruh&'s jambiya clenched between her teeth, and her blinking, squinting eyes were fixed vaguely on the hem of the witch's aba. Down the corridor, the guards were beginning to rise and rub their heads. Deciding to attack before they gathered their wits, Ruha pulled a foot away from the wall and thrust it at the princess's head.

Wei Dao continued to squint until the approaching kick had nearly reached her face... then she calmly slipped the blow by looking away and allowing the witch's heel to glance off her brow. Instantly, the

princess's hand snapped back, smashing the hard bone of her wrist into the tendons of Ruha's ankle. A sharp, tingling pain shot up the witch's shin, and

her leg went numb below the knee.

As Ruha tried to pull her foot back, Wei Dao trapped the witch's ankle in the
crook of her elbow, then locked it in place by clasping her hand against the
back of her neck. She pulled her legs away from the walls and dropped, already
raising her free hand toward thejambiya between her teeth.

The witch pushed against the walls with all her might, barely keeping herself
from falling to the floor when Wei
Dao's weight hit the end other dangling leg. From behind
Ruha, barely audible over the ebbing roar inside her head, came the muted clamor
of the guards gathering themselves up to help the princess.

Wei Dao took thejambiya from between her teeth.

Ruha swung her second leg away from the wall and smashed her heel into the back
other foe's skull. Wei
Dao's head snapped forward; then the knife slipped from her hand and her body
went limp. The princess dropped a man's height to the floor, landing in the
semi-rigid heap of someone caught halfway between consciousness and
unconsciousness. A pair of guards appeared beside her immediately.

Ruha looked up and saw light shining through the grooved planks above her head.
The pebbles were gone, having eaten all the way through the wood. The witch did

not wait to see if the soldiers below would attack her or tend to their
mistress. She braced her good foot against the wall—the leg that Wei Dao had
struck was too numb to trust—then made a fist and punched it through the boards
above her head. The wood fell apart easily, and she had no trouble widening the
hole until she came to a solid edge. The witch grabbed hold and glanced down to
see several guards climbing after her.

Although Ruha did not know any wood magic, she sprinkled a handful of decaying
wood on their heads and

muttered a few mystic-sounding syllables. That was enough to make them drop
back into the corridor and scurry for cover. Having bought herself more time,
the witch pushed her second hand through the hole—then gasped as her wrists were
seized from above by a pair of small, callused hands. Without bothering to tear
away what remained of the weakened planks, her unseen captor pulled her up
through the floor.

Ruha found herself standing before a blank-faced soldier dressed in Minister
Hsieh's yellow, silk-jacketed armor. She was in a fair-sized room furnished only
with kneeling mats, several low tables, and bookshelves, surrounded by a dozen
more of the mandarin's guards, all with long, square-tipped swords in their

hands. Along with Yu Po, Hsieh himself stood a half-dozen paces behind his guards.

"When strange events occur, it seems you are always near." Although Hsieh did not speak loudly, the ringing in Ruha's ears had faded to the point where, with a little effort, she could understand his words. The mandarin pointed overhead, where the witch's pebbles were scouring a fresh set of grooves into the coffered ceiling.
"Please to stop magic before it ruins Princess Wei Dao's apartment."

The man who had pulled Ruha out of the floor released her hands and stepped back, but the witch did not even consider casting a spell at the mandarin or any of his men. Although Tang had ordered his guards not to harm her, Hsieh's soldiers had received no such instructions and would undoubtedly strike her down at the first sign of danger to their master. Ruha gestured at the ceiling and spoke a single sibilant syllable. The pebbles fell out of the air, dropping through the hole to clatter off the dungeon's brick floor.

"So much better." Hsieh kneeled at one of the room's low tables and waved Ruha to the other side. "Please."

Ruha allowed herself to be escorted to the table, then sat cross-legged on one

of the reed mats. Although she

was not overly fond of the chairs that Heartland hosts always thrust at their
visitors, she found the Shou habit of kneeling even less comfortable.

Hsieh waited for her to arrange her aba and veil, and then said, "Please to
explain your return to Ginger
Palace. I am under impression that Vaerana Hawklyn takes me hostage to get you
out."

"She came too soon." As the witch spoke, she was frantically trying to
calculate how much she should tell Hsieh about events in Elversult. Though he
lacked the same reasons as Prince Tang and Wei Dao to conceal Lady
Feng's abduction, he might easily conclude that the best way to recover her was
to let Cypress have what he wanted. "I had not concluded my business."

Hsieh nodded thoughtfully. "And this business—whatever it is—do you finish it
now?"

Ruha shook her head. "No, I was… interrupted."

Hsieh allowed himself a tiny smile, but made no remark about the interruption
involving a trip to the dungeon. "Perhaps this business is something I can help
you conclude."

Ruha lifted her brow. "Do you not wish to know what I am doing?"

"You are spying," Hsieh replied simply. "I have need of spy."

After a moment's consideration, Ruha asked, "And who am I to spy upon?"

"I come to speak to Lady Feng, but she is not here." He leaned forward and spoke so quietly that Ruha could barely make out the words. "I understand she is in Elversuit. Perhaps she dishonors Peerless Emperor of Civilized World."

Ruha frowned, confused by the mandarin's implication and uncertain what he wanted from her. "What do you think she has done to dishonor your emperor?"

The mandarin flushed and looked at the tabletop. "Perhaps she takes lover."

"A lover?" Ruha scoffed.

Hsieh frowned and glanced toward his guards. "For spy, you are most imprudent."

"She is more than spy!" accused Wei Dao's voice.

The witch turned to see the princess pushing her head out of the hole in the floor. Her hair was disheveled and there was a red mark on

her brow where Ruha's
heel had glanced off, but otherwise she showed little sign of their battle.

Wei Dao allowed two of Hsieh's men to help her into the room, then pulled Ruha's
jambiya from her sash and pointed the curved blade at the witch. "Lady Ruha is
insidious assassin!"

The accusation caused several of the guards to reach for the witch, but Hsieh
raised a finger and waved them off. "If Lady Ruha wishes me dead, she has many
chances better than this to attack."

Ruha inclined her head to the minister. "I am grateful—"

Hsieh warned her off with a scowl and quick shake of his head. "Must wait for
princess. To Shou, form is all."
The mandarin looked at Wei Dao, then gestured at one of the mats beside their
table. "Please."

The princess slipped the jambiya into her sash, then took several moments to
straighten her hair and collect herself. For a time, Ruha thought she might be
stalling until her own guards entered the room, but no one climbed into the room
after her, nor did Hsieh's men give any indication that they expected—or would
welcome—any of the princess's soldiers to join them. At last, Wei
Dao came to the table and bowed to Hsieh, then calmly

kneeled on a mat beside
Ruha as though she had not just accused the witch of being a murderess.

"Esteemed Mandarin, please to forgive Prince and me."
By the continuing blare of Wei Dao's voice, it was clear that her ears were
suffering from the detonation even more than Ruha's. "We do not tell you all."

"Then do so now—more quietly," Hsieh urged.

Wei Dao kept her eyes lowered, "Lady Feng does not visit sick friend in
Elversult."

Hsieh barely kept from smirking. "Truly?"

"Truly. Prince Tang learns of plan to kill Third Virtuous Concubine, and he
sends her into hiding." Wei Dao raised her chin and glared at Ruha. "Treacherous
witch is assassin."

Ruha could not stomach the lie. "That is—"

Hsieh waved a cautioning finger at the witch. "You ignore form. Lady Ruha."
Though his voice was stern, his face remained as blank as ever. "Please to let
Princess explain why someone—presumably Vaerana Hawklyn—wishes to kill Lady
Feng."

Wei Dao was ready with another lie. "To stop trade in poisons. Vaerana threatens many times to'take measures' if we do not stop, but Honorable Husband does not let savages dictate business of Ginger Palace."

"How wise." Hsieh's tone was as flat as his expression was blank.

Wei Dao continued, "After we must exchange witch for person of Esteemed Minister, we think she give up and leave—then we find her hiding in ylang blossoms." The princess peered at Ruha from the corner of her eye. "She is most resolute killer."

Hsieh nodded sagely. "Most."

"We are taking her to Chamber of One Thousand Deaths when she makes lamp explode and escapes again," Wei Dao continued. "Please to lend me sword. I promise Honorable Husband that I kill barbarian before he returns with Virtuous Mother."

Yu Po immediately reached for his sword, but Minister Hsieh quickly raised a hand to restrain him. The adjutant's jaw fell slack, as did those of several guards.

"Do you not wish to hear what Lady Ruha says?" Hsieh asked.

Yu Po and the guards glanced at each other as though the

thought had never
crossed their minds. "But Lady
Ruha is barbarian!" Yu Po gasped. "Princess Dao is wife of son of Third Virtuous
Concubine."

Hsieh nodded as though he were in complete agree-

ment with his adjutant, then bit his lips as though struggling with a
difficult decision. "What you say is most true. It does not matter that Lady
Ruha saves our lives when dragon attacks Ginger Lady."

The mandarin allowed his gaze to linger on Wei Dao, who took several quiet
breaths and tried not to look concerned as the color drained from her face.

"If Shou princess claims barbarian witch intends to kill Lady Feng, then we must
believe her." Hsieh continued to glare at the princess. "If she feels certain
we understand her correctly—and if she is certain she says what she means."

Wei Dao's painted lips began to quiver, but she did not look away from Hsieh's
penetrating gaze. "I… I am certain."

Yu Po placed a hand on the hilt of his sword, but cast a questioning look at
Hsieh and stopped short of drawing it. The mandarin remained as motionless as a
statue and continued to glare at Wei Dao. Ruha hardly dared

to breathe. She did
not understand all the nuances of the exchange, but it seemed clear enough that
the minister was trying to save her life—whether because he wished to repay her
or because he needed a spy, she did not know. It hardly mattered, and the witch
sensed that even the slightest movement on her part might well bring the contest
to an unfavorable end.

As frightened as Wei Dao appeared, it was Hsieh who looked away first. "It
appears the princess is most confident of herself."

Yu Po drew his sword. Before Ruha could summon the incantation of even a simple
spell to mind, two guards grabbed her arms and pushed her forward, laying her
head flat upon the table. The witch uttered a silent prayer, begging the
forgiveness of Lander, her dead lover, for failing as a Harper, then took her
last breath and prepared to die.

The blow did not fall. After a time, Ruha opened her eyes—she did not remember
closing them—and craned

her neck against the restraining hands of her guards
She saw Hsieh and the others standing over her beside the table. The mandarin
had taken Yu Po's wrist to restrain him from giving the sword to Wei Dao.

"The Emperor's justice cannot be denied, but we are in land of savages," said
Hsieh. "We must allow Lady Ruha to speak, so her friend Vaerana Hawklyn may not
protest that our execution is unjust."

"Esteemed Mandarin, why do we care if Vaerana
Hawklyn protests?" Wei Dao's voice continued to be overloud. "She is
barbarian!"

"Vaerana Hawklyn is barbarian with army. If she makes hostage of Shou Mandarin,
does she hesitate to sack Ginger Palace?" Hsieh paused to let the others con
sider his point, then continued, "But if we follow form of barbarians and let
prisoner speak, perhaps we appease
Vaerana's superiors. Perhaps we avoid battle."

The mandarin released his adjutant's wrist. Yu Po lowered his sword, but did
not return the blade to its scabbard. He and the other Shou no longer seemed
quite so confused by Hsieh's perverse defense of the witch's life.
Ruha dared to hope their reaction meant the minister had finally prevailed in
the strange battle of protocol between him and Wei Dao.

The princess frowned, but seemed unable to effectively oppose the suggestion.
"Ask, but her answer is lie."

Hsieh smiled grimly. "Yes, if you say it is." He leaned over Ruha. "Lady Ruha,

does Princess tell truth?"

"No." The witch's answer reverberated through the tabletop and returned to her
ear sounding loud and deep.
"Lady Feng has been abducted."

Ruha's assertion elicited no cries of outrage or gasps of surprise. The Shou
remained as silent as stones, and by their silence the witch knew that none of
them, even
Hsieh, gave any credence to her claims.

Wei Dao reached for Yu Po's sword.

"I can prove what I say!" Ruha exclaimed.

It was Hsieh who scorned the witch's claim. "How can

you prove what is not possible?"

The mandarin's tone was severe and impatient, as though he had expected her to
say something else. Cold fingers of panic began to creep through the witch's
belly.
Yu Po was awaiting permission to yield his sword, and
Ruha could not imagine what Hsieh wished to hear. Wei
Dao had already declared anything the witch said to be a lie, and the Shou
seemed unwilling, perhaps even unable, to believe otherwise. The truth, even if
it could be proved, did not matter—and Ruha suddenly realized what the minister
wanted her to say.

"Princess Wei Dao is protecting her mother-in-law," the witch said. "Lady Feng
has taken a lover."

Hsieh gasped much too loudly, prompting Yu Po to step back and sheath his sword.

"Lady Ruha, you are certain?" Hsieh did not even bother to feign his shock well.
"Princess Dao is . ••. mistaken?"

"Is that not a good reason for her to have me silenced?"

"Indeed, but it does not work. I suspect this myself."
Hsieh whirled on Wei Dao and fixed her with a stony glare. "Do I not warn you
about lying to me?"

"I am Shou Princess." Though her chin was trembling,
Wei Dao held it high. "I do not lie, Esteemed Mandarin."

"No?" Hsieh glanced at the guards pinning Ruha to the table, who promptly
released the witch and stepped back.
"Lady Ruha, please to show proof of Lady Feng's imprudence."

Ruha straightened her aba and started to remind the mandarin that what she had
offered to prove was not
Lady Feng's infidelity, but her abduction—then she thought twice about confusing
the issue and held her tongue. To the Shou, the witch was beginning to realize,
truth was a relative thing. As long as she had Hsieh's

support, any evidence she offered would no doubt be taken as proof of whatever the mandarin wished.

Ruha started to lead the way out of the room, then remembered her manners and bowed to Wei Dao, gesturing toward the door. "If the princess will show us to Lady Feng's apartment?"

Wei Dao frowned in confusion, then turned to lead the way out of the room.

Halfway to the door, she suddenly stopped. Her forehead was slick with sweat and her face was sick with fear. "This is not right. I cannot show others into Lady Feng's apartment."

"Then I shall." Behind her veil, Ruha allowed herself a small smile. "I know the way, as I'm sure you remember."

As the witch moved to step past, she saw Wei Dao's hand drop toward her sash.

In the next instant, two of Hsieh's guards lay on the floor holding their bloody throats, and Wei Dao was leaping through the air, slashing at Ruha's throat with her ov/njambiya. The witch twisted her body to the side and reached out to meet the assault at the wrist, but the princess's reflexes

were as quick as
lightning. She circled the blade beneath Ruha's blocking arm and reversed it,
driving the tip toward her victim's heart as though she had been fighting
withjambiyas all her life. The witch saved herself only by falling to the floor
and madly flailing her feet in a desperate attempt to trip her attacker.

There was no need. Moving with a deliberate grace that appeared almost languid,
Hsieh slipped behind the princess. He clamped one hand over the wrist of Wei
Dao's weapon hand, then shot his other forearm around her throat and brought it
up under herjawline so hard her feet came off the ground.

Wei Dao's eyes bulged and her tongue appeared between her lips. She flung her
head back in an attempt to smash her captor's nose, but Hsieh simply tipped his
face out of the way. The princess made a brief, rasping attempt to breathe, but
the veins in her neck were being pinched shut by the mandarin's arm, causing her
head to run out of blood long before her lungs ran out of air. Her face turned a
shocking shade of purple-gray, and the Jam biya slipped from her hand. Her
eyes rolled back in their

sockets; then she stopped struggling and began to spasm.

Hsieh dropped her at a guard's feet. "Greatly unexpected. I am most curious to

see what we find in Lady Feng's chamber."

Ruha could not take her eyes off Wei Dao's unconscious form. During all her training with the Harpers, she had never seen a woman move with such deadly speed and grace. Had she not seen the ease with which Hsieh disabled her, the witch would not have believed anyone—especially a one-eyed man of Hsieh's age—could move more swiftly.

"Minister Hsieh, I thank you for my life," Ruha said. "You are a man of many hidden talents."

The mandarin smiled. "In Shou Lung, we long ago learn wisdom of being better warriors than those who guard us." He turned to Yu Po and gestured at Wei Dao. "Bind princess well and take her to apartment. Inspect her chambers to see that she is… safe."

Yu Po bowed, then began issuing orders in Shou. As Hsieh's guards scurried into action, the mandarin selected a half-dozen men to accompany him, then led the way up an immense staircase to the second story, where he astonished the palace sentries by allowing Ruha to use her wind magic to open the door to the Third Virtuous Concubine's apartment. The minister scowled at the macabre frescoes that decorated Lady Feng's antechamber, then followed the witch through the dressing closet into the bedchamber.

Ruha went straight to the corner and pulled Lady Feng's writing desk from the wall. When she did not hear any scratching or whining on the other side of the secret door, she began to fear that Wei Dao had done something with Chalk Ears. The witch took a deep breath and, wondering how Hsieh would react if it turned out she could prove neither Lady Feng's indiscretion nor her abduction, pushed open the hidden panel.

The secret chamber looked as though a whirlwind had erupted inside. The worktable in the center of the room

had been swept clean of its cauldrons and balances, which now sat upon the floor amid a knee-deep jumble of books and broken glass. Heaps of severed bat wings, blackened fingernails, and silk-wrapped spider eggs were scattered everywhere, often coated by stripes ofrainbowhued dusts and powders. One of the cabinets had even been pulled over and now lay broken into two splintered pieces.

Save for a sleeping cushion, sandbox, and two silver bowls containing untouched supplies of food and water, there was no sign of Chalk Ears. Although the jagged shards of glass had been broken out of the window through which Ruha had

escaped, the casement itself remained open and not repaired.

"Is this what you bring me to see?" Hsieh asked.

"No. What I brought you to see is gone."

Ruha could almost see what had happened. After she jumped through the window,
Wei Dao, or some other guards, had tried to capture Chalk Ears. The familiar had
panicked, and the ensuing struggle had destroyed
Lady Feng's laboratory. In the end, the little creature had escaped through the
broken window, and the princess had elected to leave it open in the hope that
the beast would return.

The witch picked her way across the room. "I had hoped to show you Lady Feng's
familiar." She picked up the red sleeping cushion. "But I fear Chalk Ears has
fled."

"Chalk Ears? Perhaps you mean Winter Blossom?"

Ruha held her hands about a foot apart. "It was a little creature that could
have been a cross between a monkey and a raccoon. I found it here when I—" The
witch stopped short of admitting what she had been doing in Lady Feng's
chambers. "It looked like it had not eaten for a week."

"He," Hsieh corrected. The mandarin waded into the room and kneeled beside the

familiar's lair. "Winter Blossom is male lemur—though I think Eye Biter is
better name."

The VeUed Dragon

Ruha caught herself staring at Hsieh's silken eye patch and looked away. "Winter
Blossom is more than a pet to Lady Feng. Had she departed the Ginger Palace
willingly, I doubt she would have left him behind."

Hsieh sighed heavily. "But familiar is not here."

The mandarin waved his guards into the room, and
Ruha's mouth went dry. She glanced out the empty window pane, already
summoning to mind the same wind spell she had used to escape Wei Dao, then
swallowed her fear and told herself not to panic. The guards arrived and arrayed
themselves around Hsieh, at the same time blocking the witch's path through the
window.

Ruha squatted beside Winter Blossom's silver bowls and waved her hand over the
contents. "The familiar escaped after Lady Feng's departure, or these would not
be full. Wei Dao hopes to lure him back."

Hsieh met Ruha's gaze. "I do not doubt what you say. If
Lady Feng takes Winter Blossom, she takes his bed." He picked up the lemur's
sleeping cushion, then tossed it to a guard. "So, where is Lady Feng, and why

does she not take familiar?"

"I told you—she was abducted."

"So you do, but I think you are lying. It is so much better if she takes
lover." Hsieh shook his head in disappointment, then gave Ruha a stern glance.
"Perhaps you tell me what you are doing in Ginger Palace—and no lies.
Today, I grow impatient with lies."

When Ruha paused to consider how much she should say, the mandarin rose. "Please
do not refuse." He glanced at two guards, who took Ruha by the arms and jerked
her to her feet. "Truth potions are most damaging to mind, and you cannot
escape."

"It was not my intention to try to escape—and let us both hope that does not
become necessary." Ruha fixed an icy glare on Hsieh and remained silent. When he
finally waved his guards off, she began, "Not long ago, a staff of some
sentimental value was stolen from the Lady Yanseldara . . ."

The witch told Hsieh of how someone was using the staff to steal Yanseldara's
spirit, and ofVaerana's belief that Lady Feng was responsible, and of her own
effort to recover the staff from the Ginger Palace, and, finally, of her
subsequent discovery of the Third Virtuous Concubine's

abduction. The mandarin listened patiently and closely. He did not interrupt, even when she told him of Tang's involvement in the Cult of the Dragon and how the prince had attempted to conceal his mother's kidnapping.

When Ruha finished, the mandarin contemplated her account in silence for many moments, then raised his hand and held up three splayed fingers. "I have questions. Where is Prince Tang now?"

"He seems to have decided that the only way to redeem himself is to personally rescue his mother." Ruha did not say in whose eyes the prince wished to redeem himself.
The less Hsieh knew about the prince's attraction to her, the better. "I believe he has taken a company of guards and gone to attempt that."

Hsieh winced, but nodded and folded down one of his fingers. "Second question.
Theft of spirit takes no more than two or three days. Why has Lady Feng not finished?"

"I am not certain. But I do know Prince Tang was awaiting the fresh ylang blossoms aboard the Ginger Lady." When the mandarin furrowed his brow, Ruha hastened to add, "The kidnapper believes he is in love with Yanseldara. Perhaps they are for a love potion?"

Hsieh shook his head. "Then why does he steal spirit? Only reason to use love potion on spirit is to bind it to another spirit, for long journey through Ten Courts of Afterlife."

A feeling of nausea crept over Ruha. "The thief is… he is not living. He is one of the undead."

An expression of pity passed over Hsieh's face, and he folded down his second finger. "Final question. Who is kidnapper?"

This was the question Ruha had been dreading. She had omitted any mention of Cypress's identity, fearing that the mandarin would decide it was safer for Lady Feng to cooperate with the dragon than to help Vaerana save Yanseldara. Nevertheless, the witch had no choice except to hope she could persuade Hsieh to ally with her, for it was growing clearer all the time that she did not understand enough about Lady Feng's magic to save

Yanseldara.

"Who take Lady Feng?" Hsieh demanded. Ruha swallowed, then said, "The same barbarian who tried to assassinate you."

Hsieh frowned at her. "No one tries to kill me." Ruha nodded. "On the Ginger Lady. The dragon."

"You are greatly mistaken." Hsieh's rebuke was both confident and gentle.
"Dragon is after gold and jewels—"

"And you," Ruha replied. "His name is Cypress, and he is the leader of the Cult
of the Dragon. He fears you have come to replace Tang and stop the palace's
trade in poisons, and so he tried to kill you."

"That is most impossible." Hsieh shook his head stubbornly. "I send messenger
with word of my visit only one day before dragon attack. Because I travel with
only light bodyguard, I instruct Prince and Princess to tell no one of my
journey—unless they tell Lady Feng?"

Ruha shook her head. "I overheard them say Lady
Feng was abducted before your message arrived."

"Then dragon cannot know I am coming. Who tell
him?"
That was when Yu Po appeared at the door. "Esteemed

Minister, I beg permission to report."

Hsieh frowned and started to hold him off, but Ruha, who needed time to think,
said, "Yu Po is not interrupting. Let him speak."

Hsieh nodded to his adjutant, who quickly picked his way across the debris and
bowed. "Princess Wei Dao is most comfortable in her apartment," Yu Po reported.
"As

I was inspecting her chambers to be certain of her safety,

I find this."

The adjutant opened his hand, revealing the exotic Calimshan gold that Tombor had put into Ruha's coffer to impress Wei Dao.

Hsieh studied the coin, then scowled at his adjutant. "Wei Dao is Princess, Yu Po. Do you expect to find no gold in her chamber?"

"Not gold like this."

Yu Po pinched the edges of the coin with both hands and pulled. The coin came apart, revealing a tiny compartment where a small paper message might be concealed.

Hsieh took the two halves from his adjutant. "Most ingenious. Do you find what is inside?"

"No," Yu Po admitted.

"But I know who sent it to her," Ruha said. "And if I am correct, Esteemed Mandarin, I also know who told Cypress you were aboard the Ginger Lady."

"Wei Dao?" Hsieh asked.

"That coin was given to me by someone who promised it would win the princess's

hospitality," Ruha said. "It did."

"How come Yu Po finds it in her chamber?"

"I saw her sneak it from my gold coffer. The person who gave it to me said the princess had a fondness for foreign coins," Ruha explained. "Now I think it contained a message from a spy in Moonstorm House, warning Wei Dao of my identity. The princess has been most insistent about wishing to kill me—regardless of Prince Tang's commands to the contrary."

Hsieh pushed the two halves of the coin together and folded it into his palm, then waved the witch toward the door. "It seems our mutual problem is solved, does it not, Lady Ruha?"

Ruha did not move. "No. How could it be?"

"If dragon kidnaps Lady Feng, then kidnapper is no threat."

The witch was confused by the mandarin's misunder-

standing—until she recalled that Hsieh had seen her destroy Cypress on the Dragonmere. She had said nothing about the dragon taking another body, and Ruha certainly saw no reason to broach the subject now.

"Do you not understand, Lady Ruha?" Hsieh asked.

"We have only to locate dragon's lair; then we find both Lady Feng and Yanseldara's stolen staff."

"Of course!" Ruha did her best to sound astonished. "And if you will me tell more about these ylang blossoms, perhaps I know someone who can be tricked into leading us to the lair."

Eleven

Tang's punt came to another fork in the slough. His boatpushers jammed their poles into the black water, the butts angled forward to halt the little dugout while he guessed at the way to Cypress's lair. Behind him arose a gentle sloshing as his men struggled to stop their heavy log rafts. Save for the unremitting hum ofmosquitos, no other sound broke the silence of the swamp. The evening light lay upon the glassy waters as sinuous and wispy as smoke, yielding no hint of the sun's location. Along the banks of the channels rose tangled webs of prop roots, supporting thickets of vine-choked bog cane as impenetrable to the eye as walls of stone. Even the sky itself was hidden from view, concealed behind a murky canopy of moss-draped boughs.

Somewhere nearby loomed the Giant's Run Mountains, a chain of high peaks lying half a day's canter southeast of the Ginger Palace, but Tang could not find the way to their steep slopes. Though he had commanded his men to remain confident,

he could feel their trust ebbing with every minute he remained lost, and even he was losing faith in his abilities. The swamp was so small that it had no name—indeed, few outside the Cult of the Dragon knew it existed at all—and twice the prince had come to Lair here with fellow cult members. It seemed impossible that its meager maze of waterways should

disorient him or anyone else, yet Tang had been trying to locate Cypress's hole for more than two hours.

The punt rocked beneath the prince's feet. He glanced back to see the commander of the palace garrison, General Fui D'hang, stepping into the dugout from a wagonsized raft of lashed logs. A squat, flat-cheeked man with an unwavering scowl and granite eyes, he wore a helmet of silver-trimmed brass and an oversized battle tunic over leather armor. Most of the men behind him were dressed in a similar manner, save their helmets were steel with brass trim.

The general bowed. "May it please the Prince to hear me."

As with all Fui said, the statement was a command,

not a request. Prince Tang nodded, but looked away to emphasize that he would
not allow the general to bully
him.

"Night falls soon, and men are uneasy at being lost—"

"Do I say we are lost?" Tang whirled on the general so fast that, had his
boatpushers not had their poles planted on the bottom, the punt would have
capsized. "We are not lost. Dragon uses Invisible Art to confuse honorable sol
diers. They may eat another lasal leaf."

Fui did not turn to issue the command. "Since you are not lost, perhaps you
guide us to dry land. It is better to camp outside swamp."

"No. We must rescue Lady Feng tonight."

The general's eyes remained stony. "If we perish in dark—"

"Tonight."

Fui's Ups tightened. "Surely, Wise Prince knows it is inauspicious to attack
eminent dragon at all, but to attack at night..."

"This dragon is different!" snapped Tang. "Cypress does not have favor of
Celestial Bureaucracy!"

"Perhaps Wise Prince explains why it takes so long to reach dragon's palace?"
Fui insisted. "This swamp is size of peasant village. By now,

we should find
dragon's home

through tenacity alone."

"It is question of patience, not 'finding!' " Prince Tang turned away from
General Fui, silently cursing the absence of a wu-jen. A little magic would go
far toward helping him find his goal. "Tell men to be ready. Not far now!"

Selecting a direction at random, the prince pointed down the fork on the right.
General Fui barely had time to leap back to his own raft before Tang's
boatpushers guided the punt into the channel. As they traveled down the curving
slough, the mosquito hum became a maddening drone. Though the Shou berry juice
the prince had rubbed into his flesh protected him from bites, clouds of the
insects dragged across his skin like chiffon.

Tang began to sense an enormous, dark presence ahead. The canopy arched higher
above the water, and the swamp grew steadily murkier and more forlorn. The
beards of moss vanished from the branches alongside the passage, replaced by the
curtainlike webs of brilliantly striped spiders with abdomens as large as a
man's fist.
Ahead of the punt, dark chevrons appeared in the water as startled snakes swam

for cover. The ends of submerged logs sprouted eyes and watched the flotilla
pass.
A half-remembered murmur echoed through the trees from somewhere ahead: the purl
of water trickling down some steep slope.

Tang felt butterflies fluttering in his stomach and beads of sweat sliding down
his brow. He withdrew a handful oflasal leaves from a basket in the bottom of
the dugout and distributed them among his boatpushers, then placed two into his
own mouth and chewed. As the protective fog arose inside his head, he began to
regard the impending battle with increasing giddiness. Soon, he would have
vengeance on his enemy. After his men destroyed Cypress's new body, he himself
would find and smash the spirit gem. Then, when Yen-Wang-Yeh's servants came
to drag Cypress's wayward spirit down to the
Ten Courts of the Afterlife, Tang would recount all the

dragon's crimes against himself and Shou Lung, thus insuring a stern verdict
that would condemn his foe to ten thousand centuries of torment in the
Eighteenth

Hell.

The rancid stench of rotting fish began to waft through the air. The channel
widened into a broad basin of black water strewn with mats of bog scum and

studded by the naked gray trunks of a bald cypress stand. On the far side of the
pool, a steep, green-blanketed scarp rose abruptly from the murky water and
disappeared above the swamp's gloomy canopy. Down the face of this slope snaked
a tiny ribbon of silver water, the same small brook casting its purl throughout
the slough. To the left of the stream, barely visible through the whirling
clouds of mosquitos, was a huge, half-submerged grotto, the moss curtain that
dangled over its mouth tattered and frayed by the constant passage of some huge
body.

Tang ordered his boatpushers to stop. Though the area had been darker and more
crowded on the two occasions the prince had visited it before, he recognized it
instantly.
Just outside the cavern lay a toppled cypress where the dragon roosted during
Lair, with the entire cult arrayed before him upon the same rafts now occupied
by General
Fui and his men. Rising from the waters around the perch were heaps of large
fish skeletons, some with bits of gray, gritty hide still clinging to the thick
bones, and hanging in the limbs of nearby trees were hundreds of long-toothed
jaws.

Tang was most distressed to see that Cypress had already devoured so many

sharks. From what the prince had learned during his brief association with the
cult, when a dracolich's body was destroyed, he lost the ability to speak, cast
magic spells, and use his terrible breath weapon. Unfortunately, he could regain
those capabilities by consuming a mere tenth of his previous body, which he
could always locate via a strange mystical bond—even if the corpse had been
burned, shredded, or eaten. Judging by the number of skeletons lying in the
water, Cypress

could not be far from a full recovery.

General Fui's raft pulled alongside the punt, and Tang pointed at the cavern.
"That is dragon's palace." The prince allowed himself the pleasure of a touch of
sarcasm at the term 'palace.' "Men a^e ready?"

The general glanced at the four rafts behind his, each bearing fifteen anxious
warriors, and flashed a hand signal. A gentle clatter rustled over the pond as
his men reached for their halberds and pushed lasal leaves into their mouths.
Fui watched a moment, then slipped a leaf between his own lips and nodded.

Tang drew his sword, then looked back to the cave and waited for General Fui to
lead the soldiers forward
Thanks to his lasal-induced daze, the prince realized he

could actually see the
murk gathering over the swamp. It looked like a thick, oily smoke seeping from
the fetid depths of Cypress's lair, where the dragon rested upon his bed of
gold, dreaming ofYanseldara and filling the air with the dank gloom of his
wicked obsession.

The prince's thoughts turned to his mother, and he found himself wondering what
effect the unnatural murk would have on her. If the fumes darkened her fair
skin, she would never forgive—most cursed lasal! That was the trouble with it;
the user found it difficult to keep his mind focused on the task at hand, and he
sometimes found his head filled with ridiculous ideas.

Noting that Fui still had not given the order to advance, Prince Tang looked to
his general. "Why do you wait?" He waved his sword at the cavern. "Go kill
dragon!"

Fui's head slowly turned toward Tang's punt. The general's pupils were nearly
as large as his irises, and a blank, almost muddled expression had fallen over
his normally resolute face.

"You do not lead us into cavern, Brave Prince?"

"Me?" Tang looked at the sword in his hand and understood the reason for the
general's confusion. "I cannot lead way into danger. I am

Prince!"

"That is what I try to say in Ginger Palace." Under the lasal's influence, Fui spoke more freely than he would have otherwise. "Do I not suggest it is foolish for you to take field? Do I not hint that your inadequate preparations oblige men to take extra risks to protect you?"

The lasal haze inside Tang's mind began to darken and churn. "I am Prince! Soldiers die at my will!"

"True, but Honorable Prince does not waste their lives!" the general spat. "If you desire Lady Pong's rescue, you must stand aside and let someone who knows—"

A chorus of snickers filled the air behind Fui. The general stopped speaking in midsentence, and his widening eyes betrayed his astonishment at the words coming from his mouth. He dropped to his knees and kowtowed on the raft, pressing his forehead down so close to the edge that his silver-trimmed helmet fell off and slipped beneath the inky waters.

"Mighty Prince, I do not know these words! They are not my own!"

Tang hardly heard the apology. The lasal clouds inside his mind had worked themselves into a storm, and he could think of nothing but

his fury.

"Words belong to him who speaks them." Tang glanced at the rafts behind Fui,
where more than seventy soldiers were studying the swamp's gloomy canopy and
biting their cheeks to keep from laughing. Bolts of lightning began to flash
inside the prince's head. "Lasal loosens tongue. It cannot change secret
thoughts of any man."

"Merciful Prince, I command garrison of Ginger Palace since it is built, and
before that I humbly serve in personal guard of Lady Feng. Please to allow me
honor of dying in battle." Fui lifted his head and dared to meet
Tang's eyes. "Let me lead soldiers into dragon's palace."

"I myself lead way into lair." Tang glared at his general until the last soldier
no longer found it necessary to bite his cheeks; then he pronounced Fui's
sentence: "Shou general must respect master with heart as well as tongue, so
that he does not forget himself and make men

laugh at Worthy Prince. To fail in this is treason."

Fui's face went as stiff as a mask. He whispered a prayer, beseeching his
ancestors to find a place for him in the Celestial Bureaucracy, then touched his
brow to the log. "I am ready."

Tang looked past Fui to Yuan Ti, the moon-faced commander of the sentries who protected his lizard park. Since the young officer had already faced the dragon and lived, General Fui had selected him as second in command for this mission.

Yuan swallowed and reached for his sword, but his hand began to tremble, and he did not draw the weapon. The youth clenched his teeth as though fighting a wave of nausea, and tears welled in his eyes.

Tang scowled at the hesitation. "Why do you delay? Punish General Fui's insolence!"

Yuan managed to pull his sword halfway from its sheath, then turned away sobbing. The youth's profile accentuated his flat cheeks, and it was then Tang realized the boy's identity. The fury faded from the lasal induced storm inside the prince's head, and the tempest became instead a drizzle that clouded his thoughts with cold, sick regret. It was not uncommon for Shou generals to make places for their sons in their own commands, but how was Tang to know the youth's identity? A Shou prince did not trouble himself with the domestic lives of his inferiors. He could hardly be expected to know every son that his officers brought to the Ginger Palace.

Tang allowed General Fui's boy to weep, grateful for a few moments to struggle
with this new dilemma. As much as he disliked the idea of ordering a son to slay
hi?
own father, he could hardly retract the command now.
The men had already come close to treason when they laughed at him earlier; to
tolerate any further insubordination would only convince them that he was a
weak and inept leader. Yuan would have to obey the command. If there was another
way to solve the problem, the prince could not see it through the lasal haze.

In a gentle but loud voice. Tang said, "You are a Shou soldier. You must do as I
order."

The youth choked back his sobs and turned to face
Tang. "Merciful Prince, the lasal leaves—"

General Fui raised his head. "Silence, Yuan!" His voice had assumed the hard
edge of command. "Do not dishonor our ancestors by arguing with your Prince!"

The general pressed his brow to the logs again. The thought flashed through
Tang's mind that there must be a way to show mercy without showing weakness, but
it was chased into the lasal haze by a great cry from Yuan's mouth. In a motion
too fast to see, the youth unsheathed his sword and brought the blade down on

his father's neck. There was a wet crack, and Fui's head toppled off the raft into the swamp. The general's body shuddered once, then went limp and slipped out of its kowtow, slowly stretching forward to push its headless shoulders into the dark pool.

Fui's head rolled in the water, bringing his granite eyes around to stare vacantly upward. Tang's stomach began to feel queasy, but he clenched his teeth against the feeling and forced himself not to look away. The whole point of the punishment had been to show his soldiers that he was a strong leader, and he would not accomplish that by allowing the gaze of a dead man to intimidate him.

Yuan ripped the front off his silken battle tunic and used it to dab his father's blood off the blade. When he finished, he sheathed his sword, then carefully folded the cloth and slipped it beneath his leather corselet.

The adjutant bowed to Tang, his eyes now as hard as his father's. "I obey your command. My Prince."

Tang honored the youth by returning his bow. "The Minister of War shall—" The prince had to interrupt himself to take a deep breath and regain control of his churning stomach. "He shall hear of your dedication to duty."

Yuan's eyes showed no sign of softening, but they did shift away from the
prince's face toward the water, where

a dozen shapes were rapidly drifting toward General
Fui's body. At first. Tang took the forms for floating logs
Then he noticed the eyes and nostrils protruding above the bog scum, and also
the powerful tails snaking back and forth behind their bodies.

The first beast slid between the prince's dugout and
Yuan's raft. Silently, it took Fui's head into its jaws and slid beneath the
dark water, vanishing from sight almost before Tang realized he was looking at
an alligator.

Yuan reached down to pull the rest of his father's body back onto the raft, then
almost lost a hand as another of the monsters latched on to the corpse's
shoulder. The cadaver slid off the logs and disappeared beneath the surface in a
quick swirl. A second creature, easily as long as Tang's dugout, dove after the
body-stealer, and the water erupted into a bloody, churning froth as the two
animals tore the cadaver to pieces.

Tang finally lost control of his rebellious stomach and turned away while it
purged itself—then nearly lost his head as a pair of tooth-filled jaws rose from

the water tr snap at his face. He slashed at it ineffectually with the sword in
his hand, and his boatpushers stepped over to hold the thing at bay while he
finished retching. Behind the prince sounded a startled scream, followed by a
loud splash and the brief gurgle of a man's voice.

An astonished murmur rustled through the swamp;
then half the soldiers in the company cried out in fear
The rippling siffle of halberds slashing water filled the air. Several men fell
into the pond and shrieked as they were dragged beneath the surface.

When Tang's stomach finally finished with him, he wiped his mouth on a
boatpusher's sleeve, then turned to see his entire company of soldiers besieged
by alligators.
The men were standing back-to-back in the center of all five rafts, thrusting
the tips of their long halberds at the throng of circling alligators—several of
which looked longer than the vessels themselves. Many of the logs were smeared
with blood, while the water was littered

with broken halberd shafts, ribbons of shredded silk, and alligators writhing
in pain.

As Tang watched, a swimming alligator whipped its body around, driving its head
and forequarters onto a raft. The attack was met by a flurry of driving

halberds, most of which pierced the beast's armored hide and sank to a depth of
several inches. The monster clutched at the logs with the claws of its stubby
forelegs and dragged itself forward. The men braced themselves, trying to shove
their blades deeper into their attacker's flesh.

The creature ignored the assault and continued to claw its way onto the raft.
One warrior lost his footing and slid across the raft, where another alligator
seized his ankle and dragged him, screaming, into the scumcovered waters.
Several others, finding their halberds'
damp shafts slipping backward through their grasp, dropped their polearms to
reach for their swords. Only one man could drive his weapon deep enough to cause
the behemoth any injury. The alligator simply snapped its head to one side and
jerked the weapon out of the soldier's hands, then retreated into the water.

Tang peered over the side of his dugout and saw several alligators floating
alongside, their ravenous gazes searching for something to snatch. Fortunately,
the punt's sides were high enough to conceal his vulnerable legs, or one of the
beasts would certainly have pulled him into the swamp by now. As it was, he took
the precaution of raising his arms above his chest and ordering his boat
pushers to do the same, lest one of the creatures attempt to snatch a dangling

hand and capsize the punt.

"Perhaps Wise Prince cares to give order?"

Yuan stood in the center of his own blood-streaked raft, apparently oblivious to the screams of the legless man at his feet. The young officer was watching Tang with what could only be called a look of impertinent impatience, as though he understood exactly what needed to be done and knew his commander for too much of a fool to see it.

Tang scowled in thought, determined not to lose an^ more face by asking Yuan's advice. The prince could not order an advance without forcing the men to step within reach of the alligators' snapping jaws, but neither did he see any sense in remaining where they were and allowing the monsters to pluck them off the rafts one-by-one.
What they needed was magic. A wu-jen could drive the beasts away, so his soldiers could get on with the important business of finding and slaying the dragon.

An angry light flared in Yuan's eyes. "When enemy attacks, it is customary for commander to issue order."

"Alligators are not enemy!" Tang snapped, waving his sword at the beasts between

their vessels. "They are stupid animals."

A loud thump sounded in the bottom of Tang's dugout. He looked down to see a scaly brown cord gathering itself into a coil. Whether because of the lasal haze in his mind or the shock of having the thing drop into his boat, the prince did not recognize the writhing tendril until it showed the pink lining of its mouth. Tang calmly brought his sword down, catching the snake behind the head.

The prince did not enjoy snakes as much as he did lizards, but he knew enough about the species to recognize the white-mouthed viper as more of a swimmer than a tree climber. He scowled and looked up, then cried out in surprise as three more dark, writhing ropes dropped out of the canopy overhead. One of the snakes splashed into the water beside the dugout, where it was promptly snapped up by an alligator, but the other two plopped into the bottom of the punt.

Almost before he realized it, Tang's sword had lashed out to sever the head from one serpent. The other recovered from its fall quickly enough to bury its fangs into a boatpusher's leg. Unlike the other two snakes, this one was gray, with a black diamond pattern and rattles on its tail. The victim screeched and reached for his dagger.
Before the man could draw his weapon, Tang grasped the

viper behind its head and yanked it free. He tossed the

serpent into the water, where a ravenous alligator quickly avenged its attack on the prince's servant.

The snake bite bled profusely, instantly coating the boatpusher's foot in sticky red syrup. The man opened his mouth to thank Tang, then cried out and dropped into the bottom of the punt. He clutched his leg and began to squirm, causing the dugout to rock dangerously.

"Stop, fool!" Tang ordered. By the panicked cries echoing across the pond, the prince knew that his boatpusher was not the only soldier to suffer a snake bite.
"Do you mean to capsize us?"

The man looked up. "What does it matter? I die anyway We all die!"

Tang slapped the man. "Poison makes bite bleed and hurt, but it does not kill—unless you spill us into swamp with alligators!" Though he was not particularly fond of serpents, the prince's poison trade had taught him more than a little about their venom. "Now stand up and return to duty."

Tang glanced up and saw another ropy form dropping out of the gloomy boughs overhead. He caught this snake on his sword and flicked it

away, then quickly returned his eyes to the canopy. Though it was difficult to see into the murk above, it seemed to him that the branches were alive with slinking, writhing forms, all working their way into positions over his small flotilla of rafts.
The behavior seemed most unnatural for snakes, which were usually more anxious to avoid trouble than start it.

Tang hazarded a glance at the rafts and was horrified to see his soldiers in a panic. They were lying prone on the logs, groaning over their bleeding bites and begging their ancestors for help, or they were dancing madly about on the logs, hacking at serpents and trying to stay beyond the reach of the voracious alligators. Many had failed already. The water was thick with severed limbs and shredded leather corselets, and some of the behemoths in the water were even beginning to drift away, each clutching a drowned man in its crooked jaws.

"This is dragon's doing!" Tang yelled. "He fears to show himself!"

Another pair of snakes dropped into his dugout. He dispatched one, while the bitten boatpusher used his pole to fling the other to the alligators.

"Take up poles and go to cavern!" the prince commanded.

"Do not fear snakes!
If you are bitten, you can still fight."

Incredibly, the soldiers ignored their attackers and obeyed. The alligators
continued to pull men into the water, and the snakes continued to rain down on
their heads, but the rafts started to drift forward. Now that the company had
orders, the entire troop was focused on its goal, and it did not seem to matter
how many ofthe>r comrades fell. Thinking that perhaps he had a natur il aptitude
for military leadership, Prince Tang flicki < another serpent into the water and
commanded his boc.'pushers forward, then turned to face the cavern.

He found Cypress roosting on the toppled tree outs-He the cavern. The dragon
looked half-agam as large as he had in the spicehouse, with scales so dark they
seemed almost shadows in the murky swamp light. Perched beside Cypress were a
pair of small wyverns that had been fluttering about the swamp during the
prince's earlier visits. The creatures looked like huge iguanas, save that
their thick tails ended in needle-sharp barbs and they had wings instead of
forelegs.

Cypress's empty eye sockets swung toward the prince
Am I to assume you don't have the ylang oil?

Tang's knees nearly buckled. His grip grew so we A

that he dropped his sword into the bottom of the boat.

"I have come for Lady Feng. Then we talk about oil."

There is nothing to talk about. Without the oil, you will find only death.

"I prefer that fate to disgrace of leaving venerable mother with you."

Tang retrieved his weapon, quietly relieved that Cypress had not yet recovered his voice. Without his

breath weapon and magic spells, the dragon would not prove so difficult to defeat. The prince glanced over his shoulder, and when he saw the remains of his small company still behind him, he raised his sword. His hand was trembling so badly that the blade wobbled like the mast of a tempest-tossed caravel, but he did not let that stop him from pointing it at Cypress.

"There is enemy! Do not be frightened. He cannot spray you with acid, and he cannot hurt you with magic!"

Tang's soldiers raised their spears and cheered bravely, then allowed their rafts to drift to a stop and glowered at the dracolich. Cypress opened his muzzle slightly, returning the troop's glare with a mocking, yellow-toothed grin.
The two wyverns licked their chops, and the alligators pulled two more men into

the water.

The prince scowled at his men, unable to understand why they had stopped
advancing. "Attack!"

"In what manner, Honorable Prince?" The question came from Yuan, who stood on
the raft closest to Tang's dugout.

The order seemed clear enough to the prince. "Attack with swords and halberds,
of course!"

Yuan allowed himself the briefest shake of his head, then turned to the troops.
"Number One Raft, assault to right. Number Two Raft to center. Number Three to
left, and others remain in reserve." When the men began to maneuver as ordered,
the adjutant bowed to Tang. "Perhaps Brave Prince wishes to move to safer
position behind reserves?"

Tang almost said yes, then remembered how his men had struggled to hide their
laughter during General Fui's u-nfortunate slip of tongue. "No. I lead attack,
as I say earlier."

Tang ordered his punt forward and was surprised by the strength of the fear that
boiled up inside him. It suffused his entire being, filling him with a hot,
queasy sensation as foul as bile. He felt flushed and dizzy and achy, as

though he were physically ill, and it seemed that his

whole body had suddenly gone weak. Cypress remained on his roost, flanked by
his two wyverns and calmly awaiting the battle, his empty eye sockets never
straying from the prince's dugout.

Tang chewed another lasal leaf, hoping that the sickening dread he felt was
the result of a mind attack and not his own weak constitution. The haze inside
his mind grew thicker, but his fear did not subside.

Cypress allowed the prince's dugout to advance almost into halberd-hurling
range, then nudged the two wyverns. The beasts folded their wings and tipped
forward, slipping into the swamp as quietly as alligators
They dove beneath the surface, then swam toward Tang's boat, the bristling
crests along their spines slicing through the scummy water like shark fins.

Tang dropped his sword and grabbed a boatpusher's halberd, then willed his heavy
legs to carry him to the front of the punt. He braced his feet against the walls
and tried to ignore the voice calling through the lasal haze inside his head,
urging him to remember himsel*
and take his proper place behind the reserves. The prince raised his halberd and
watched the wyverns approach
They came more or less straight on, their spine crests cutting through the water

to each side of the dugout. He angled his weapon to the right and thrust the
blade into the water, aiming for the space between the creature's shoulder
blades.

The halberd bit deep into the wyvem's thick hide and nearly jumped from Tang's
hands. An unexpected scream of wild, brutal exhilaration burst from the prince's
lips.
He clamped down on the weapon's shaft and dropped into a squat, both to drive
the blade deeper and to keep from being jerked out of the dugout. The creature's
head erupted from the water, filling the swamp with a loud, sizzling hiss.

Tang jerked his halberd free and swung the blade, axelike, at the creature's
head. The beast retracted its sinuous neck. Instead of counterstriking, it
hissed again,

wagging a forked tongue as long as a pennon flag.

Tang had seen whiptail lizards wag their tongues at prey often enough to know
what was coming next. He dove into the bottom of the dugout and heard the
wyvern's barbed tail swishing over his back. The sound ended in a slurpy thud,
then a boatpusher—the snakebitten one, judging by his delirious
voice—screamed.

With a trembling hand, the prince grabbed his sword, dropped it, grabbed it again, and came up swinging in time to see the wyvem's tail jerk his boatpusher from the punt. The fellow landed facedown and did not move. So deadly and quick was the wyvern's poison that the man puffed up before Tang's eyes. The flesh on his hands and neck grew black and slimy, while the red stain blossoming around the man's head suggested his nose was bleeding profusely.

The wyvern flicked its victim off its tail, then dove back beneath the water and swam toward Number Three Raft. Tang remembered the other beast and spun around, half-expecting to feel a tail barb piercing his own flesh.
He found only an empty dugout, with a forsaken halberd and a pool of black slime to mark where the second boatpusher had been standing a moment before.

Tang's earlier jubilation had vanished like smoke into fog; now he felt helpless and frightened. If a halberd could barely scratch a wyvern, how would it pierce a dragon's thick armor? He had been a fool to come into this swamp without a wu-jen.

The men on Number Two and Number Three Rafts voiced their battle cries and thrust their halberds into the swamp. A pair of tails lashed out of the water almost as one, each driving a barb through a soldier's

leather armor. Tang saw
scales rippling as the wyverns pumped their victims full of poison, then a
flurry of blades as his soldiers hacked at the beasts' sinuous tails.

In the next instant, the back end of Number Three
Raft rose on a wyvern's back. The creature's wings beat the swamp as it
struggled to raise the boat higher. Men

tumbled into the water, screaming and slashing at alligators. Finally, when
the raft had grown light enough, the wyvern twisted sideways and flipped it.

Number Two Raft suffered a similar fate; then the two creatures dove beneath the
surface and swam toward the rafts Yuan had held in reserve.

Tang grabbed a halberd and used it to push his punt after Number One Raft, which
had nearly reached
Cypress's roost. It was difficult to say whether the dragon was watching the
approaching vessel or not. He held his head turned to one side and slightly
cocked, so that one empty eye socket was turned toward the dark water and the
other on the murky canopy. His scaly lips were slightly curled, as though he
found the cacophony of howling voices a pleasant evening serenade.

Number One Raft scraped past a heap of shark skeletons

and stopped beside
Cypress's roost, less than twenty paces from the dragon. Several men quickly
formed a wall at the front of the craft while their companions gathered behind
them.

Tang pushed harder, trying to catch up before they launched their attack. The
voice in his lasal-clouded head kept urging him to turn back. The closer he came
to his foe, the less he cared about the disrespect his men had shown him
earlier—or the shame he would bring upon himself by failing to rescue his
mother. Nevertheless, the prince continued forward, not because he cared about
his men or was suddenly determined to prove that he was no coward, but because
he knew that the only way to leave the swamp alive was to kill his foe.

Tang had almost caught Number One Raft when the men in the front hurled their
halberds like spears. As the shafts arced toward the dragon, half a dozen
soldiers leaped onto the toppled tree and rushed forward to attack. The
boatpushers again started to move their clumsy vessel forward.

Cypress calmly brought a wing around to shield himself from the flying
halberds. The steel blades pierced the

leathery scales easily enough, but lacked the force to drag

the heavy shafts
through the tough hide and penetrate the dragon's body. One weapon splashed
into the swamp, but most simply lodged themselves in a wing and dangled there
like needles in an oxhide.

Cypress lowered his wing and swept the line of charging warriors off the
toppled tree, then hopped off his roost and landed in the middle of the raft.
The boat settled a few inches beneath the water, but did not sink, and its
occupants whirled on their foe in a flurry of flashing steel. Growling and
hissing like one of his wyverns, the dragon lashed out with tail and wings and
sent bodies splashing into the water on all sides.

Tang gave his punt another shove and stepped into the bow, praying his weak
knees would have enough strength to hold him up when he leaped onto Number One
Raft.
Before he arrived, Cypress raked his black talons down the length of the raft,
severing the lashings that held it together.

The logs rolled apart, plunging all who had been standing upon them into the
swamp. Tang's punt continued to glide forward, and somehow—perhaps because he
was too frightened to move—the prince found himself standing fast in the bow,
with a clear flank shot and
Cypress looking the other way. The prince clamped his arms

around his halberd
and gathered his rubbery legs beneath him, determined that the dragon would not
shrug off this strike as easily as the wyvern had shrugged off his first.

Tang was staring at the scale through which he intended to drive his halberd, so
he did not see Cypress's wing sweeping toward him on the backswing. He simply
heard an earsplitting thump, then found himself sailing over the toppled tree
trunk with his gold-trimmed helmet flying in one direction and his weapon in
another. He splashed into the warm water, sank to the bottom, and nearly got
tangled in a bed of fish skeletons before he recovered his wits and kicked free.

His head ringing and his body aching. Tang broke the surface and peered over the
log. The bog scum had erupted into a pink-tinged froth, with the dragon stand
ing waist-deep in blood and shark skeletons, battering his foes with wings and
tail and calmly tearing their bodies apart with gore-dripping talons. The
prince's warriors could do little to defend themselves. The legs of most were
hopelessly tangled among the fish bones, and the rest could barely hold their
chins above the water, much less swing their heavy blades powerfully enough to
pierce

Cypress's thick scales.

The voice inside Tang's head shrieked through the lasal haze, reminding him that he was a Shou prince and should have fled long ago. He managed to ignore it for a short time, but when the alligators appeared at the fringe of the battle and began to drag away the wounded, the voice began to sound wise. Tang pushed away from the log and, moving very slowly to avoid attracting alligators, he slipped beneath the surface and swam toward the mountain.

Twelve

A sliver of pearly light split the midnight gloom between the gate towers, and Ruha realized the guards of Moonstorm House were opening the gates for her. She lashed her mount with the ends other reins, urging the exhausted Shou prancer into the ragged semblance of a gallop. The two packhorses behind her snorted in protest, but had little trouble adjusting to the new pace. They were both larger than the witch's mount and, loaded with four sacks of ylang blossoms each, far less heavily burdened.

From behind Ruha came the clatter of firing crossbows, followed instantly by the ringing echoes of iron bolts skipping across

cobblestones. One of the packhorses screamed, and the witch's prancer stumbled as the train slowed. She twisted around and saw the last beast hobbling badly. Like the animal ahead of it, its chest was covered in lather, and its eyes were bulging with fear and exhaustion.

Thirty paces down the deserted street, two dozen of Hsieh's guards lashed their mounts madly, making a last desperate effort to catch Ruha. As planned, they were closing the distance and doing everything possible to make it appear they truly wanted to succeed. The lead rider accepted a loaded crossbow from the man at his flank, then raised the weapon and fired. A dark streak

flashed between him and the hobbling horse. The beast screeched and would have fallen had the other animals not dragged it along, stumbling and staggering.

Cursing her pursuers for heartless killers, Ruha blew a sharp breath in their direction and uttered a simple wind spell. A howling gust tore down the street, blasting the first three riders half out of their saddles. As they struggled to regain their balance, they were overtaken by the galloping throng at their backs; two more soldiers raised their crossbows. Hsieh had commanded his men to

make a convincing show of the chase, and Shou were nothing if not obedient.

A chorus of strumming bowstrings sounded from atop the gate towers. The leading
Shou riders sprouted arrows in their chests and fell from their wooden saddles.
The rest of Hsieh's men whipped their reins around, guiding their horses into a
sheltering alleyway.

Ruha's prancer clattered through the dark gateway of
Moonstorm House into a spacious, hexagonal courtyard of ornamental trees and
twining garden pathways. The witch reined in her mount, bringing the entire
train to a halt and drawing a relieved nicker from the wounded packhorse. The
enormous garden was enclosed by a milky wall, with slender, cone-roofed towers
standing at each of the six corners. The castle had no central keep, nor, as far
as the witch could tell, any sort of inner defensework at all.

Despite the excitement of the phony chase, Ruha found herself completely and
utterly exhausted by the long ride from the Ginger Palace. This was her second
night without sleep. She kept yawning behind her veil, and her eyes were
burning with the need to close. She braced her hands on her saddle pommel and
fought to clear her head; she could not allow herself to even think of resting,
not until she had laid her trap.

Captain Fowler rushed from a gate tower's narrow doorway, followed closely by
Vaerana Hawklyn, Tombor the Jolly, and Pierstar Hallowhand. Though the hour was

well past midnight, they were still dressed in jerkins, tunics, and trousers.
They had, no doubt, been up planning tomorrow's assault on the Ginger Palace.

Fowler stopped beside Ruha and took her mount's foam-covered reins. "Are you
well, Witch?" The half-ore scowled at the lather on his hand, then wiped it on
his pants. "And what have you done to this poor beast?"

"Galloped him all the way from the Ginger Palace, by the looks of it," said
Vaerana, joining them. She turned to
Pierstar. "You'd better have someone rouse John the farrier and his boys.
These horses need some attention."

Pierstar stopped beside the wounded beast and winced at the two bolts lodged in
its rump, then turned toward a tower in the back of the castle.

"I'll do it myself," he said. "And I'll send a patrol of
Maces after those riders. I doubt we'll catch them, but I
don't want them in the city. Those Shou can be sneaky."

Tombor the Jolly went to the first horse and stood on his toes so he could reach
the knots. "Perhaps we should unload. Since Ruha risked her life to bring us

this cargo,
I assume it is of some importance."

"It is." The witch glanced at the cleric just long enough to nod, then stifled a
yawn and dismounted. "It's the last ingredient the Cult of the Dragon needs to
steal Yanseldara's spirit—ylang blossoms. They arrived on the Ginger Lady
with Minister Hsieh."

"Then you've saved Yanseldara!" Fowler's outburst was as much question as
exclamation, but that did not stop him from folding Ruha into his arms. "Maybe
now you can get me my gold."

"Not so fast." Vaerana went to help Tombor unload the pack train. "As I
understand things, stopping the cult's not the same as saving Yanseldara."

"That is correct. I have bought us more time, but
Yanseldara is still in danger until we recover the staff."

Vaerana tossed a sack of ylang blossoms on the ground.
"I don't suppose you can tell us where it is?"

The witch shook her head. "I am sorry. Lady Feng's

familiar was gone. It was all I could do to return with the ylang blossoms."

Vaerana sighed wearily. "I guess I'll have to do this myself."

"I am sorry I failed you."

Vaerana shrugged. "I'm sure you did your best."

The Lady Constable probably did not mean to be insulting, but her patronizing tone vexed Ruha and made the witch burn to expose Tombor's treachery. Unfortunately, vindication would have to wait. Until the cleric was gone, Ruha could not tell Vaerana about his treachery, or about her plan to trick him into leading them to Cypress's lair.

"What are you planning to do?" Ruha tried to sound genuinely sorry for her failure. Once she sprang her trap and exposed Tombor, it would be Vaerana's turn to apologize. "Perhaps I can help?"

Vaerana rolled her eyes, but managed to make a civil reply. "Why don't you get some rest? You look like you need it, and this is better done alone."

"Then you'll try to snatch a member of the cult?" asked Fowler.

Vaerana nodded and reached across a horse to untie another sack of ylang blossoms. "I know a couple of likely places to find one."

Tombor shook his head. "Even if you're lucky enough to catch someone who knows where the lair is, he won't tell you. If you want to make him

talk, take me along."

"Sorry, Tombor. We'll be moving fast tonight." Vaerana patted the cleric's stomach. "I don't think you can keep up."

"You'll have to torture them."

Vaerana nodded grimly. "I won't enjoy it."

Somehow, Ruha suspected the Lady Constable of being less than honest.

"Vaerana, before you go, we should talk." Ruha could hardly explain why in front of Tombor, but the last thing she wanted was for Vaerana to leave Moonstorm House.

"I should tell you of some other things I learned in the Ginger Palace."

"Then talk." Vaerana continued to help Tombor unload. "I don't have all night."

Ruha forced herself not to look in Tombor's direction. "First, Cypress is back."

Vaerana's jaw fell, and she let a sack of blossoms slip from her grasp.

"I saw him in the spicehouse," Ruha explained. "He was smaller than the first time I saw him. He could not speak or use his magic, but it

was definitely
Cypress. By kidnapping his cult members, you may be drawing his attention to
you."

Vaerana turned back to the pack train. "Better to face him in Elversult than in
his lair." There was not much conviction in her voice. "What else?"

"Cypress is not stealing Yanseldara's spirit so his cult can control Elversult."
Ruha was frantically trying to think of something that would keep the Lady
Constable inside Moonstorm House without arousing Tombor's suspicions. "The
dragon wants her spirit for himself."

"For himself?" Vaerana echoed.

Ruha nodded. "I think Cypress is in love with Yanseldara, or believes he is."

Tombor raised his brow. "You seem to have learned quite a lot during your
visit!"

Behind her veil, Ruha bit her lip and wondered if she had said too much. Her
mind was as weary as her body, and she found it difficult to be subtle when her
thoughts were so sluggish.

"I overheard a conversation between the prince and the dragon." Then, doing her
best to sound indignant,

Ruha said, "I am not entirely inept."

"No one said you were—er, at least not lately." Vaerana motioned Fowler over to hold the wounded packhorse.
"But Cypress doesn't have any reason to love Yanseldara. She's the one that killed him!"

"You don't know much about men, do you Lady Constable?" Fowler gave her a roguish, yellow-fanged grin.
"There's a fine half-elf tavern wench over in Saerloon who slams an ale tankard against my head every time I see her, and I keep coming back for more. What's that tell you?"

"That you let your orcish blood get the best of you."
Vaerana growled. "You ought to know when to quit."

Fowler shrugged, trying not to look hurt. "Maybe, but what I'm saying is that I don't quit. I keep wanting what will never be mine. Seems like that's what Cypress is doing. Yanseldara killed him—maybe Sharee'll kill me with that tankard someday—and now he's trying to steal her, just as he stole all that treasure that belonged to someone else. He wants what he can't have. It's part of being male."

Vaerana pulled the last of the ylang blossoms off the wounded horse. "Fair enough. Let's say I don't understand men—not that I'd want

to—what does it
matter?"
The Lady Constable dropped the sack on the ground. "It doesn't change anything
I've got to do tonight."

Vaerana turned to walk toward one of the towers, and
Ruha, desperate to keep her from leaving, caught her by the arm.

The Lady Constable frowned at the witch's hand.
"What now?"

"Do you have an oil press?" Ruha asked.

"In the kitchens," Tombor answered. "Why?"

The witch hesitated. She had already baited the trap, and she worried that in
her exhaustion, she would explain too much and alert Tombor to her trap. On the
other hand, if she did not explain, Vaerana would not stay to see the traitor
take the bait.

"The members of the Cult of the Dragon are not the only ones who need the ylang
oil. After we recover the staff, we must pour the ylang oil over Yanseldara to
draw her spirit back into her body." Ruha continued to hold
Vaerana's arm. "But if the oil is poured over a vessel containing the spirits
of both Yanseldara and Cypress, the

two will be joined together forever. That is why I believe the dragon is in

love with Yanseldara."

"And how did you learn so much about the uses of ylang oil?" Tombor asked.

"I am a witch," Ruha replied, trying to dodge the question with a cryptic
reply. "So is Lady Feng."

In fact, Minister Hsieh had explained how to use the ylang oil. He had also
provided Ruha with another Shou potion, one with which she was to send a message
through Yanseldara to Lady Feng.

Vaerana studied Ruha for several moments, then asked, "So, you're saying we need
to press the oil ourselves—and be damned sure the cult doesn't steal it back?"

"Yes." Actually, this was only what Ruha wanted Tombor to believe. The
blossoms in the sacks were the old, unsuitable ones; the fresh ylang was still
in the Ginger
Palace, being pressed in the spicehouse refinery. "That is what I'm saying."

"Fine." Vaerana looked to Tombor. "See to it that the blossoms are pressed and
well guarded."

If there had been any lingering doubts in Ruha's mind that Tombor was the spy,
they vanished when she saw the delighted twinkle in his eye. "The oil will be

ready when you get back."

Vaerana turned back to Ruha. "If you're satisfied, now I've got to go."

With that, Vaerana pulled her arm out of Ruha's grasp and started across the courtyard. The witch stared after her in bewilderment, then scurried to catch up.

"Wait, Vaerana! There is one more thing."

The Lady Constable stopped beneath the dark branches of a fragrant sweetbay tree. "What is it?"

Before the witch could explain, Tombor called, "There's no need to delay Vaerana. If you need something, I'm sure I can help."

Ruha glanced over her shoulder and saw Tombor coming after them, his jolly face bent into a mask of solicitous

concern. The witch cursed under her breath and turned her back on him.

"Before you leave, you must visit me in my chamber." she whispered to Vaerana, "alone!"

Vaerana shook her head. "I don't have time—"
Ruha took her arm again. "You must! Promise me."
Vaerana glanced down at the witch's hand. "Then will you let me go?"

Ruha nodded and removed her hand. "It is important."
"If you say so." Vaerana looked past Ruha's shoulder to

Tombor, who was already upon them. "Lodge the witch in

Pearl Tower."

"Pearl Tower?" Tombor echoed, clearly surprised.

"Pearl Tower." Vaerana turned to leave. "Are you having trouble with your
ears?"

The cleric took Ruha's arm, gripping it more tightly than was necessary. "I'll
show you to a chamber as soon as we've seen to the blossoms."

"Perhaps we could go to the tower first," Ruha suggested, worried she would
not be there when Vaerana came to see her. "I have not slept in two days."

Tombor shook his head. "You said yourself we can't let these blossoms fall into
the hands of the Cult of the
Dragon. Besides, the kitchen is on the way to Pearl
Tower. It'll take only a few minutes to stop and set up the press."

Ruha accompanied the cleric back to the horses. She removed a small satchel of
supplies from her saddle, then helped Fowler and Tombor gather up the bulky
sacks of ylang blossoms. Leaving the beasts with a guard,

they walked down a
chain of meandering pathways to a thatch-roofed shed against the back wall of
the fortress.
The place smelled of animal grease, smoke, and fresh
Heartland spices.

Tombor stopped at the entrance and banged on the wooden door. "Up with you,
Silavia! I've business in your kitchen!"

"The cook bars the door when she sleeps," explained

Fowler. "Otherwise, the night guards pilfer her breakfast
tarts."

They had to wait several minutes before a sleepy voice sounded on the other side
of the door. "Go away, Tombor. I
won't have you calling in the middle of the night. You only want something to
eat."

Tombor looked slightly embarrassed. "I've—uh—guests with me, Silavia. We need
the oil press. It's for
Lady Yanseldara."

Silavia hesitated a moment, then asked, "Truly?"

"Truly," replied Ruha. "The matter is urgent, I assure you."

"Very well." Silavia sounded more put-upon than curious. "Let me throw on an
apron."

From inside the building came several moments of bustling and whispering, which
elicited a resentful scowl from Tombor. When a muffled thump finally announced
the withdrawal of the bar, the cleric pushed the door open and stepped inside,
where a stout, tousle-haired woman stood in a nightshirt and crisp white apron.
The flickering taper in her hand illuminated an ashen, moonshaped face with a
bottle nose and plump-lipped frown.

Tombor dropped his sacks inside the door, then snatched the candle from the cook
and went to light several others. A flickering yellow glow soon filled the
room, revealing a neatly kept chamber filled with cutting tables, kneading
troughs, and spice barrels. The embers of several spent fires glowed in three
different fireplaces, one with a roasting spit over the hearth, one with soup
cauldrons sitting in the firebox, and one built beneath a brick oven. Silavia's
sleeping pallet lay behind a dough bench, where a burly, black-bearded man stood
looking down at a half-eaten honeycake and two empty mead pitchers.

Tombor glared at the embarrassed man for a moment, then growled, "You'd better
get yourself to the gate, John.
There's a wounded horse there, and Pierstar's looking for you."

"My thanks for telling me so, Tombor." The farrier, looking happy for any excuse
to leave, started toward the door.

Tombor watched the man leave, then turned to Silavia
"What was he doing here?"

"It's none of your concern who I give my honeycakes to!" Silavia retorted. "Not
that there wouldn't be some foi you, if you ever came around at a decent hour."

"It's this trouble with Yanseldara's catalepsy!" the cleric protested. "I've
been busy."

"So have I," Silavia snorted. She led the way to a small storage pantry and
unlocked the door with a key from her apron. "The oil press is in here, if you
want it. Don't expect me to help you with it."

Tombor motioned to Fowler, who dropped his ylang blossoms beside the cleric's
and followed him into the little room. Ruha put her own sacks on the floor and
tried not to yawn as Silavia glared at her.

Tou a friend of Tombor or Tuskface?" the cook asked.

"I am closer to Fowler. I do not know Tombor very well
Is he an important person in Elversult?"

"You could say that," Silavia replied proudly. Tombor's the

one who saved
Vaerana when the assassins first got after her. He's done the same twice
since—at the risk of his own life, I might add."

The witch smiled, anticipating the apology she would be due when she exposed
Tombor's heroism as a cull ploy
"I had not realized he is so well thought of."

Fowler emerged from the storage pantry, carrying a small oil press in his arms.
The device was a mere fraction the size of the screw press in the spicehouse
at the
Ginger Palace, being small enough so that a single cook could move it without
help. Tombor followed a moment later, holding a small, empty cask beneath one
arm. The two men set their burdens on a vacant table, then the cleric motioned
Silavia to his side.

"How do I work this thing?"

Silavia fetched a large bowl from a shelf, then set it

beneath the drainage spout. "It's simple enough. First you put the raw goods
in here."

She pulled the handle, raising the platen and displaying a small wooden box.
The bed had a grid of channels cut into the bottom, and it was tilted so that
the oil would run into a collection trough at one end.

"Then you lower the top plate, and it squeezes the oil out." Silavia demonstrated, then stepped aside. "And when you're done, you clean up after yourself."

Tombor cast a wary eye at the eight bags of ylang blossoms, then looked to Ruha. "How much oil do we need?"

"Enough to cover Yanseldara from head to foot," she replied. "I suggest you press all of the blossoms."

Silavia smiled at the cleric. "It looks like you're going to be here a while. Maybe I can find some honeycakes for you."

Tombor's eyes lit up. "That would make our task more enjoyable."

"If I may be excused, I shall leave it to you to press the oil." Ruha did not bother to stifle the yawn that came over her. "I am very tired. Perhaps Captain Fowler can show me to Pearl Tower."

Silavia raised her brow. "Pearl Tower? I think not. Jarvis isn't likely to let a pair of strangers in there."

"No, but you can take her, Silavia." Tombor tried to remove a gold ring from his chubby finger, but had to moisten the knuckle with saliva before he could tug it

off.
"Show this to Jarvis, and hell know you speak for me."

Scowling at the imposition, Silavia accepted the ring and threw a cloak over her
shoulders. Ruha retrieved the small satchel she had taken from her horse, then
waved at Fowler to come along and followed her guide into the gloomy courtyard.
They passed several dark sheds similar to the kitchen before turning onto a
serpentine path of white crushed rock.

The witch paused there and allowed Silavia to march a dozen paces ahead, then
whispered to Fowler, "You must return to the kitchens and help Tombor with the
blossoms."

The half-ore frowned. "You couldn't tell me that before we left?"

"I could not. Tombor is a cult spy."

"What?"

"I lack the time to explain, but I am certain. He and
Wei Dao were working together." Ruha pushed the halfore back toward the
kitchen. "Now, return to the kitchen.
When he opens the last sack of blossoms, come get me."

Fowler did not move. "Why?"

"So we can follow him to Yanseldara's staff, of course." Ruha whispered. "Go!"

"We?" he grumbled, starting back toward the kitchen. "Collecting the gold you owe me's getting to be as much work as stealing Storm Sprite in the first place."

"You stole your ship?" Ruha gasped.

Fowler frowned. "Aye—you don't think I could've bought a ship like her, do you?"

"Truthfully, I had not given the matter much thought."

Ruha turned to find Silavia waiting fifteen paces up the path, hands on hips.

"Are you coming or not? I thought you were tired."

"I am tired—extremely tired." Ruha scurried to catch up. "That must be why it did not occur to me to leave Captain Fowler with Tombor. I'm sure his work will go faster with an assistant."

"Not much," snorted the cook. "You can squeeze oil only so fast."

Ruha followed Silavia down the path, past several intersections to a slender tower faced with gleaming abalone shell. To reach the building's entrance, they had to climb a detached stairway to the second story, then cross a small drawbridge to an open portcullis. A pair of

Maces stood beside the entrance, fully armored in scalemail and equipped with
more weapons than they could have used with six hands. As the witch and her
guide approached, the guards continued to stare straight ahead.

The largest, a swarthy giant of a man with brown eyes

and dark straight hair, spoke in an officious voice. "By the order ofVaerana
Hawklyn, household staff is no longer permitted in Pearl Tower."

The two guards crossed their lances before the doorway; then the speaker
scowled at the cook.

"You know that, Silavia—and especially at this time of
night."

"Don't get haughty with me, Jarvis!" The cook produced Tombor's ring and
shoved it under Jarvis's nose.
"Take a look at that and do as I say."

Jarvis pulled back so he could inspect the ring, then snapped his lance back to
his side and returned to attention. The smaller man followed suit.

"You have a command from the Jolly One?" asked

Jarvis.

Silavia smiled as though she were thinking of telling the

huge guard to jump off the drawbridge, but she only stepped back and waved a hand at Ruha. "Tombor wants this woman shown to—" Silavia stopped in midsentence and scowled at the witch. "Not to his chamber?"

Ruha shook her head quickly. "No, and it was Vaerana who asked Tombor to see that I was lodged here."

If Jarvis was impressed, he did not show it. He simply waved Ruha into the tower, then picked up a candle and lit it from one burning in a wall sconce. Shielding the flame with his free hand, he led the witch up a spiraling staircase. The passage was so narrow that his mail-clad shoulders rasped against both walls at once.

Once they were safely out of Silavia's earshot, Ruha said, "I am expecting a—" she yawned, "—a visit from Vaerana."

Jarvis missed a step and nearly fell, filling the stairwell with a ringing clamor as he thrust a hand out to catch himself.

"Is something wrong?" Ruha found the guard's consternation puzzling. "Has she been here already?"

Jarvis shook his head and smoothed his tabard. "I haven't seen the Lady Constable, but that doesn't mean

she hasn't been here. She might come through the passage from Moon Tower,
and I would never know it."

Ruha considered this worrisome possibility, then rejected it as quickly as it
entered her mind. Had Vaerana already come and gone, she would certainly have
left a message with the guards.

Jarvis stopped at a landing and opened a doorway into the main part of the
tower, where a short corridor led to a vaulted alcove that served as one of the
fortress's exterior arrow loops. He escorted Ruha past three doors, two with
loud rumbling snores reverberating through the wood, then opened a fourth. The
chamber inside was as lavishly furnished as it was small, with wool tapestries
on the walls, a true wooden bed, a small table with a pitcher and basin, and a
stone bench built into the alcove of another arrow loop.

Jarvis lit a tallow pot hanging inside the door, then stepped aside to let Ruha
enter. "I'll tell Vaerana which room you're in."

"That is very kind. And do you know Captain Fowler?"
Jarvis's eyes widened slightly. "The half-ore?"
"Yes. If he asks for me, please fetch me at ence."
The guard nodded, then backed into the hall and pulled the door shut. Ruha sat
on the stone bench and peered out the arrow loop at the

side of a wooded hill.
She leaned her head back against the wall and felt her heavy eyelids beginning
to descend. She did not have the strength to raise them.

Tang lay facedown on the dark mountainside, his toes kicked deep into the
slippery mud to keep from sliding through the ferns down into the swamp. Though
he had his palms pressed tightly over his ears, he could not shut out the voices
of the dead. The spirits of his soldiers kept wailing at him. Their words were
incoherent, but he knew what they wanted. He could feel their craving, deep

down in his abdomen where his own shrunken spirit cowered like that of a
frightened peasant. They needed him to look at them, to acknowledge the futility
of their sacrifice, to intercede with Yen-Wang-Yeh and tell the Great
Judge that they had died bravely and well and that their mission had failed
through no fault of their own.

Tang could not bring himself to utter the prayer. To concede their valor was to
admit he had suffered defeat at the hands of a barbarian; worse, it was to admit
defeat at his own hands. When his soldiers laughed at him, he had let his
embarrassment dictate General Fui's death.
The price for that arrogance had been the failure of his

assault, and the prince did not care to admit—to himself or his ancestors—that he been had such a fool.

If that made him a coward, so be it; Shou princes were taught to be cowards, and forgetting that lesson had been the cause of his ignoble defeat.

Tang's resolve only made the voices echo louder inside his head. He rolled onto his back and sat up. Midnight gloom filled the swamp below like a funeral pyre's black smoke, spreading an oily, clinging ink over everything it touched. The darkness was broken only by a faint fox fire glow that illuminated the floating corpses of the screaming dead soldiers.

"Silence, I command!" Tang hissed. "Present yourselves at Ten Courts and leave me in peace!"

A gentle sloshing sounded below. Something broke the surface of the black water, sending a crazy pattern of rippling, ghost-faint lights bouncing off invisible cypress trunks. Tang froze, praying the disturbance had been caused by a restless alligator.

It was impossible to say how long the prince stared into the darkness. He was not conscious of breathing until long after the air had grown heavy with silence and the pond had returned to its glassy stillness. It occurred to him that the

voices of his dead soldiers had fallen quiet; then he sensed a pair of long
reptilian necks rising from the black water. He did not see the creatures so

much as feel a pair of lighter, warmer presences among the cypress trees
below, but he knew without doubt that his craven outburst of whispering had
drawn the attention of Cypress's wyverns.

Tang had not expected the two reptiles to emerge froni the cave that night. They
had both suffered a substantial battering during the destruction of the Shou
assault party, so the prince had assumed they would lie up for the night and
lick their wounds. Still, with a ready supply of fresh meat floating outside
their door, it was not surprising they had come out to feed. Tang was glad he
had decided not to hazard moving at night. If the creatures had been outside
when he started rustling through the brush, they would surely have killed him.

No sooner had Tang finished congratulating himself on his wisdom than the ground
trembled beneath his legs
He stifled a cry and, thinking one of the reptiles had landed nearby, reached
for his only weapon, a pitifully inadequate dagger. Instead of feeling the sharp
sting of a wyvern's tail barb, however, he heard a series of faint, muffled

knells—such as a distant bell or gong might make.

The tolling had hardly begun to fade before a loud purl rolled from the mouth of
the grotto below. Cypress's form—a huge, shadowy darkness far blacker than the
surrounding swamp—emerged from the lair and seemed to pause outside the cavern.

The wyverns hissed in frustration and swam, rather noisily, back into the
cavern. A loud, basal throb reverberated through the swamp as Cypress's mighty
wings beat the air. Visions of the dragon swooping down out of the darkness
filled the prince's mind, at least until he realized the pulsing was growing
softer and more distant. The dragon was flying away.

Tang sighed in relief, then kicked his heels deep into the mud and felt
something slithering across his leg. The prince remained motionless until he
located the creature's head, then calmly grabbed it behind the jaws and

flung the writhing thing down the hill. He had nothing to fear from
snakes—perhaps from the spirits of his dead soldiers, whose voices were again
filling his ears—but not from snakes.
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Ruha slept without dreaming and awoke sometime later, lying on the soft bed with
the heavy woolen quilt pulled high beneath her chin. Her

first thought was not
that she usually took off her aba before sleeping, or that she never pulled the
blanket up to her chin, but that she had slept the night away. She threw the
cover off and rushed to the alcove, where, to her relief, she saw the treetops
still dancing in silver moonlight. Only then did she notice that someone had
removed her veil and realized that the tallow lamp had been extinguished—she
could not have been asleep long enough for it to burn itself out!—and it
occurred to her Vaerana had already come and gone.

Ruha fumbled around in the darkness until she found her veil on the stone bench,
then felt her way out the door, into the hallway, and down the spiraling
staircase.
Jarvis and his partner were leaning on their lances outside the portcullis.

The witch paused to put on her veil, then demanded,
"How long have I been asleep?"

Startled by Ruha's question, they whirled around with lance tips lowered. When
she cautiously stepped into the flickering light of their candle, both men
sighed and snapped to attention.

"How long ago did Vaerana put me in my bed?" Ruha demanded.

The two guards glanced nervously at each other, then

Jarvis said, "Actually, I laid you in the bed."

Ruha raised a hand to her face. "You removed my veil?"

Jarvis looked first confused, then embarrassed. "The

Lady Constable commanded me to—er, she said that you deserved your rest—"

"Vaerana said that?" Ruha could hardly imagine those words coming from the Lady
Constable's lips.

"Yes, about three hours ago. She rushed up the stairs and right back down
again." Jarvis glanced at his companion, then added, "She ordered me to see
that you rested comfortably, and to tell you she would look in on you when she
returned."

"Kozah take her for an impatient she-camel!"

Jarvis scowled at that outburst. "There's no need for calling names. She was
only trying to be considerate—and that's a rare thing for Vaerana Hawklyn."

"It would have been considerate to wake me!" Ruha retorted. "She was taking
advantage of my fatigue. How soon will she return?"

Jarvis shrugged. "She was dressed for battle."

Ruha cursed again, this time under her breath. "And what of Captain Fowler? I told you to fetch me if he asked."

"He has not asked," Jarvis replied stiffly.

Ruha sighed in relief. If Fowler had not come for her, she could still spring her trap. "I want one of you to come with me, so you can show Vaerana where I am hiding."

"Hiding?"

"It is for the good ofYanseldara. That is all you need to know, Jarvis."

Ruha started across the drawbridge without waiting for the guard to agree. Before she reached the other side, Jarvis's heavy steps were booming across the thick planks behind her.

"We're not supposed to leave our posts," he complained.

"And Vaerana was supposed to speak with me before she left. Because she did not, we must now improvise."

They descended the stairs and retraced the meandering path to Silavia's kitchen. With the door and shutters all closed, the place looked as dark and silent as the other sheds built along this section of the wall. Wonder-

ing how those inside could tolerate the cloying smell of vlang oil without
opening the windows, Ruha slipped beneath an unruly wax myrtle. She settled into
a hiding olace so deliberately uncomfortable that she would not fall asleep,
then sent Jarvis back to Pearl Tower.

A long, bone-aching time later, Ruha began to debate the wisdom of going to
check on Tombor's progress. She had expected it to take him quite some time to
press all eight sacks of ylang blossoms, but the first gray hint of false dawn
had already appeared in the eastern sky.
Household servants were beginning to trudge about their morning tasks, and it
would not be long before some passing groom or maid discovered the witch lurking
in the bushes.

Ruha heard the crunch of heavy boots coming down the path. She backed out from
beneath the wax myrtle and saw Jarvis and Vaerana approaching. All thoughts of
chiding the Lady Constable about last night's departure quickly vanished from
Ruha's mind. Vaerana was limping badly, with one arm hanging slack at her side
and the side of her face so swollen it looked as if she had been kicked by a
horse. What remained of her tattered jerkin was black with half-dried blood, and
even her boots looked as though someone had tried to cut them off her feet.

"What happened to you?"

Vaerana squatted beside Ruha. "Ambush." The word came out mushy and difficult to understand. "They were waiting."

"And I know who told them you were coming." Ruha resisted the temptation to point out that Vaerana could have avoided the beating by awakening her last night.
"The Cult of the Dragon has a spy inside Moonstorm House."

A murderous glint flared in Vaerana's eyes. "Who?"

Ruha pointed toward the kitchen, where a pair of scullery wenches were just entering the door. "The spy will reveal himself soon enough."

Vaerana's hand drifted toward the blood-smeared hilt of her sword. "What's the sense in waiting? Let's get him now."

Ruha laid a restraining hand on the Lady Constable's arm. "Wait. He is going to lead us to the dragon's lair
That's what I was trying to tell you last night."

Vaerana scowled. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because I would have ruined the trap," Ruha explained. "The traitor was—"

The witch was interrupted by a muffled shriek from inside the kitchen. The door
burst open and both scullery wenches came rushing outside. One woman held her
hands over her mouth, while the other waved her arms at the door and yelled
incoherently. With a sinking stomach, Ruha leapt up and raced toward the shed
behind
Vaerana and Jarvis. Vaerana pulled the crying wench out of the way and led
Jarvis and Ruha into the kitchen.

The room was as dark as pitch, for all of the candles and tallow lamps had been
extinguished. The cloying perfume ofylang blossoms lingered in the air, though
not heavily enough to disguise a coppery, more familiar scent: blood. A few
steps inside the door, the Lady Constable suddenly stopped and squatted on her
haunches.

"Fetch a light."

As Jarvis left to do his mistress's bidding, Ruha knelt close to Vaerana and ran
her hands over the floor. It did not take long to find Silavia's plump, cool
body lying facedown on the wooden planks. There was a soft, sticky mess where
the back other head should have been.

"Who did this?" Vaerana demanded.

"A cult spy." Ruha no longer felt any joy in her coming vindication, in large part because they were going to find another body in the kitchen and she knew who it would be. "This is my fault. Had I not fallen asleep—"

"This is no time for blaming yourself!" Vaerana snapped. "Just tell me about this spy."

"There were only two people in the kitchen with Silavia: Tombor and Fowler."

"You think Tusks did this?" Vaerana scoffed. "And I was beginning to think you might not be such a bungler!"

Ruha bit her tongue. A sharp retort would do nothing to bring Fowler back, and even less to convince Vaerana ofTombor's betrayal. The Lady Constable would realize the truth for herself soon enough.

Jarvis returned with a lit candle, which he promptly used to find and light several tallow lamps. As the flickering light illuminated the room, it became apparent that Silavia had been struck down as she fled, for she had left a short trail of bloody footsteps behind her. The rest of the kitchen looked normal enough; there were no tables overturned, the room was not strewn with utensils, and the walls were mercifully unspattered with blood.

Ruha took Jarvis's candle and led the way toward the pantry.

The oil press was not on the table where it should have been, but she quickly forgot about that as she stepped around the corner of the table and saw Fowler's stout body sprawled on the floor. The captain was lying amidst a pool of dark blood, with the handle of a long butcher knife protruding from the middle of his back. His neck was turned at an impossible angle, and his astonished gray eyes were staring straight ahead.

Vaerana slipped past Ruha and crouched down beside Fowler. "So much for your spy."

"I did not say that Fowler was the spy." Ruha's tone was sharper than she intended, for she was boiling over with anger and guilt. "I was speaking of your friend, Tombor the Jolly."

Vaerana's jaw dropped. "You think Tombor…?"

Ruha nodded. "He was the only one in the room."

The Lady Constable rose, shaking her head. "Not Tombor. He saved—"

"I know; he saved you from the cult's assassins, more than once." Ruha paused, giving Vaerana time to draw her own conclusions. When the witch saw no sudden gleam of understanding in the Lady Constable's eyes, she

said, "The attacks weren't real. They were a trick to win your confidence."

A look of humiliation flashed across Vaerana's face, but it vanished as abruptly
as it had appeared. "You don'tknow that."

"Don't I?" Ruha waved her hand around the kitchen
"Where are the ylang blossoms?"

Vaerana's gaze roamed across the chamber, her complexion turning as white as
alabaster when she did not find the eight bulky sacks. Finally, the Lady
Constable whirled on Ruha.

"You knew he would steal the blossoms—and you let him?" Vaerana looked almost
relieved to have someone upon whom to vent her anger. "You let him kill Fowler?"

"I did not let him kill anyone!" the witch snapped
Vaerana's words hurt more than they should have, perhaps because Ruha feared
there was more truth to them than she would have liked. "I had hoped we could
follow him to Yanseldara's staff—which we might have done, had you bothered to
awaken me and hear my plan!"

Jarvis interposed his armored bulk between the two women. "Tombor was gone by
then. I doubt he stayed much longer than it took him to kill the half-ore and
Silavia."

Ruha turned to the empty table and, seeing no mess upon the surface, nodded. "He
was in a hurry to get out of here. He took the oil press with him."

"The press maybe, but not even Tombor could sneak eight sacks of ylang blossoms
out the gate," said Vaerana,
"The sentries would ask too many questions. They saw what you went through to
bring those sacks to us."

"Perhaps he took them out some other way," Ruha suggested.

"Yes, and I think I see how," said Jarvis. The burly guard took Ruha's candle
and went to the back wall, where a mass of roofing straw lay scattered around a
butchering bench. He climbed onto the table and stuck his head up between the
rafters, then raised the candle

hieh enough to illuminate his shoulders sticking up through a hole in the
roof. "He climbed onto the roof and threw the sacks over the wall."

"Fowler's tnck!" Ruha gasped.

A long, heartsick groan slipped from Vaerana's lips.
She hung her head and braced her hands on the table edge.
"I failed her."

"Not yet." Ruha went to the Lady Constable's side and,

rather uncertainly, laid
a hand on her shoulder. "Tombor took the wrong blossoms."

Vaerana raised her brow. "The wrong blossoms?"

Ruha nodded. "The ones Tombor took were only bait.
They were picked in the evening, and they are not potent enough to serve the
dragon's wishes. Cypress needs blossoms picked in the morning, and those
remain at the
Ginger Palace."

Vaerana stood up straight. "Then what are we waiting for?" She turned to Jarvis.
"Find Pierstar and tell him to call out the Maces! We've got a palace to storm!"

Ruha caught Jarvis's arm. "That won't be necessary.
Minister Hsieh has promised to give us the blossoms, in exchange for returning
Lady Feng to him unharmed."

"How are we going to do that?" Vaerana demanded.
"Isn't she with Yanseldara's staff in Cypress's lair?"

Ruha nodded. "When we recover one, we rescue the other. It costs us no extra
effort."

Vaerana considered this for a moment, then scowled.
"That'd be fine—if we knew where to find the lair. And since you were trying to
trick Tombor into leading us there…"

Ruha raised a hand to silence Vaerana. "There may be

another way. In my room, I
have a potion. If we can get
Yanseldara to drink it, we can contact Lady Feng and perhaps discover the
location of Cypress's lair."

Vaerana studied Ruha out of one swollen eye. "Where did you get this potion?"

"From Minister Hsieh," Ruha answered. "Now that he is helping us—"

"Helping us!" Vaerana thundered. "It's Shou mag that's done this to Yanseldara!"

"Yes, but—"

The Lady Constable shook her head. "How do you know this won't hurt her?"

"I do not," Ruha admitted. "Minister Hsieh said that if the connection between
Yanseldara's body and spirit is too weak, we could sever it entirely—but that is
unlikely as long as she remains strong enough—"

"No!" Vaerana shook her head vehemently, then stepped away from the table and
started toward the dooi
"When will you learn? You can't trust a Shou—ever."

"What other choice do we have?" Ruha started after
Vaerana, who did not even acknowledge the question
"Wait! Where are you going?"

The Lady Constable did not even slow down as shf stepped through the door.
"Where do you think? To have
Pierstar wake his trackers!"

Thirteen

Tang saw the serpent dart beneath a ti plant and hopped across the stream after
it. He stirred the spearshaped leaves until the viper struck at his snake
stick, then flipped the Yshaped head around and pinned the creature's neck to
the ground. He kneeled beside his captive and grabbed it behind the head. This
snake was the largest yet, so great in diameter that he could not close his hand
around its slime-scaled throat. There would be plenty of venom.

The prince twined the serpent's writhing body around the shaft of his stick and,
picking his footing very carefully, carried the heavy thing across the stream
to his workbench. Atop the flat rock lay two sacks of supple leather cut from
the collars of a pair of boots. With sharpened sticks protruding from them at
all angles, the bags looked like melon-sized cockleburs. They were stuffed with
wads of silk ripped from the battle tunics of dead soldiers, whose voices Tang

still heard screeching above the drone of the mosquitos.

"Be patient, my troops. Soon I intercede for you." If Tang could find the strength to see his plan through, his ancestors would be so overjoyed that he would no longer need to hide his failure from them. "Soon I pray to Yen-Wang-Yeh; I testify to your bravery, and he renders honorable verdict."

The spirits took no comfort in the prince's promise. They continued to screech.

Tang sighed and set his snake stick aside. He took the sack by the long, unsharpened stake that served as a handle—it was not wise to touch the bladder with bare hands—and held it close to his captive's face. The frightened viper struck instantly, sinking its fangs through the supple leather and into the wad of cloth inside. The prince shook the serpent to encourage the release of more venom, then repeated the process several more times. When he had milked the last of the creature's toxins, he flung it down the hill and stooped over to inspect his handiwork. Both sacks were so full of poison that cloudy beads of venom were seeping back through the fang holes.

Tang carried the poison-filled bladders down to the swamp, where the cadavers of

his dead soldiers lay scattered across the pond as thick as lily pads. Most of the corpses had been savagely mangled by alligators or bitten cleanly in two by the wyverns, but a few were blackened and bloated from dozens of snake bites, often to such an extent that runnels of thick black fluid spilled from splits in the skin. These had been molested by neither alligator nor wyvern, and it was the observation of this fact that had kindled again the prince's hopes of redeeming himself.

After retrieving his dugout and making a careful search along the edge of the swamp, Tang had located two relatively whole bodies that were not bloated with snake poison. One man had managed to swim to dry land after being eviscerated, while the other had either drowned or died of fright—the prince had found him caught beneath a cypress root with no obvious wounds.

Tang stuffed one of his poison bladders into the abdomen of the eviscerated soldier, then used his dagger to create a place for the second ball in the other man's stomach. He closed the wounds with small wooden pins and dressed the pair in the cleanest, least-tattered battle tunics he had been able to find. If the men's spirits

objected to having their bodies used as bait, the prince

could not tell over
the din of voices already assailing his ears. He loaded the cadavers into the
dugout, leaning one man over the bow and propping the other in the stern.
Into the bottom of the punt, he placed a halberd and some supplies he had
gathered from his dead troops, including a rope, torches, oil, and a waterskin.

After peering through gray mosquito haze to make certain no alligators lurked
nearby—most had retreated to their dens to gorge themselves on last night's
catch—
Tang slipped into the bog scum. As the water rose above his waist, the stench of
decaying plants and rotten fish grew immensely more powerful. He gagged and
nearly emptied his stomach, then slapped a hand over his nose and forced himself
to breathe through his mouth until he grew accustomed to the reek. He pushed the
dugout toward Cypress's cavern, moving so slowly that even he could not see the
water rippling. A familiar, cold weakness crept over his limbs, and his heart
began to pound so loudly it drowned out the wails of the dead soldiers. In
response, they raised their voices until it seemed the entire swamp reverberated
with their howls.

"Worthy ancestors, please to silence spirits," the prince begged. "It is
difficult to be brave with such din."

If anything, the spirits wailed more loudly, yet not loudly enough to drown out
the small, whispering voice that kept telling Tang he was a fool to face the
wyverns alone. It was not the place of Shou princes to wade through swamps
filled with the choking stench of death and rot, or to brave black waters
infested with leeches and alligators.

The bottom vanished beneath Tang's feet. He forced his legs and arms into
service and swam toward the cave.
The closer he came to the moss-draped maw, the weaker his limbs felt. He doubted
he would have the strength to enter the grotto, but that was not required. All
he had to do was push the dugout into view of the wyverns, and they would do the
rest.

As the prince consoled himself with these thoughts, it occurred to him there was
a weakness in his plan. How would he know when—or even if—the wyverns took his
bait? The poison would be both painful and quick. Once the stakes punctured the
lining of their stomachs, the great reptiles would thrash about and screech
madly for a short time, but Tang would not hear them. The dead soldiers were
wailing too loudly; the prince would not have heard it if Cypress himself roared

in his ear.

Tang allowed the dugout to drift to a stop, then hung from its stern. He had two choices: go into the cave with the corpses, or make his report to Yen-Wang-Yeh so the soldiers would be silent.

Or sneak out of the swamp while Cypress was away, added the insidious voice inside his head.

"I do not go back!"

Feeling proud for avoiding the obvious choice of a coward, Tang took the second most cowardly course and swam the dugout toward the yawning cavern. It seemed entirely possible the wyverns would kill him, but that was preferable to disgracing his ancestors by admitting that he had turned out to be a fool.

The punt nosed in front of the cavern mouth. When the wyverns did not immediately come swooping out of the darkness, Tang took a deep breath, then slipped beneath the water and pushed the dugout around the corner. The din of his dead soldiers faded to a watery roar, and the cowardly voice in his head stopped urging him to flee.
The prince continued to ease forward, hoping his feet did not break the surface when he kicked, struggling to keep his hand from slipping on the boat's slimy

bottom. His lungs were already burning for air, but he knew it was only the
coward in him looking for an excuse to flee.

Tang continued to kick, praying he would feel the wyverns' strike rock the
dugout before his craven lips opened and sucked a mouthful of fetid water into
his lungs. It occurred to him that the wyverns might be gorged already. But they
had to be ravenous after last

night's burst of fighting, and the two lizards had not yet finished feeding
when Cypress sent them inside to guard the lair. Unless the prince had
misinterpreted last night's events, they would be voracious enough to devour the
punt as well as its contents.

So why hadn't they attacked?

Tang's yearning for air grew so overwhelming that he nearly opened his mouth.
Instead, he blew his breath out through his nostrils and continued to swim.

At this point, he expected the coward inside to remind him that it was treason
to risk the life of a Shou prince, to urge him to swim for the swamp. The
whispering voice remained mercifully silent, perhaps because it knew
Tang had come too far. The punt was his only camouflage. If he was not behind
its sheltering bulk when he pushed his head above water,

the wyverns would swoop
down to bite him in two, just as they had bitten apart those bodies in the swamp

outside.

A black fog gathered at the edges of Tang's perceptions, and he realized he could no longer deny his lungs. He rolled onto his back and pushed his head up alongside the slimy hull. When his face broke the surface, he opened his mouth and quietly filled his chest with dank, moldy air.

The cavern ceiling hung thrice a man's height above hie head. It was a dark vault of broken stalactites and shadowy hollows, dimly illuminated by the swamp's emerald light. Here and there were blocky holes where some huge chunk of stone had long ago fallen into the water, shaken loose by an earthquake, or perhaps some ancient outpouring of Cypress's anger.

Tang allowed his gaze to follow the curve of the ceiling down to the wall, then farther down to a rock ledge looming above the water. Hanging above this stony bench were two pairs of huge orange eyes with slit pupils and gleaming, voracious gazes. The prince's heart skipped a beat or several, and he stopped himself from crying out only by pulling his head beneath the water.

The wyverns struck the next instant, taking Tang's bait so

hard that they
slammed the bottom of the dugout into his chest. The impact drove the air from
his lungs, and he found himself choking on fetid brown swamp water. His head
broke the surface of its own accord and violent coughs began to rack the
prince's body. He grabbed the side of the punt and tried to regain control of
his convulsing chest.

A pair of severed legs splashed down on the other side of the dugout. Tang
looked up and saw four reeling wings silhouetted against the cavern's far wall.
Still coughing, he grabbed for his halberd, nearly capsizing the punt as he
reached inside. The wyverns turned toward him.
Their orange eyes glowed bright as fire, and strings of flesh dangled between
their needle-sharp teeth. In the dim light, the prince could barely make out a
prickly leather ball lodged in the corner of one creature's mouth.
He could not see the second poison sack, but the other reptile kept whipping its
narrow head from side to side and thrusting out its forked tongue, as though
something were caught in its throat.

The wyverns swooped low over the water. Tang found the heft of his weapon and
saw his attackers raise their tails to strike. He forgot about the halberd and
pulled hard on the side of the dugout, flipping it over on top of him. The

polearm's shaft fell across his shoulder; then a pair of loud, sharp thuds
cleaved the din of his dead soldiers' voices. The bitter smell of wyvern
poison filled the air. The prince grabbed the halberd and slipped beneath the
surface.

A muffled crack reverberated through the water, followed quickly by a great
gurgling sound as a large mass splashed into the pool. Tang kicked away from the
spreading slick of wyvern poison—he did not want the stuff seeping into his
scratches—and came up for air.

At the base of the stony ledge lay one of the wyverns, thrashing about in the
water and hurling shards of splintered dugout in every direction. A puffy
black bulge had

formed halfway down its sinuous neck, where the snake venom was eating away
the delicate tissues of the throat lining. As the ring of swollen flesh began to
restrict the flow of blood and air, the creature's nostrils flared, and its eyes
bulged. It swung around and, when it tried to rip the obstruction from its own
throat, came away with nothing but a mouthful of black mush. It flung the putrid
flesh across the cavern, then suffered a wave of uncontrollable convulsions
and collapsed into the water.

A long, mournful hiss sounded from atop the ledge, where the second wyvem lay above its mate. One side of the beast's head had bloated into a shapeless mass of dark flesh. The reptile itself looked listless and sick, but there were no tremors or spasms to suggest the venom would ultimately prove fatal, and the venom ball was hanging precariously at the corner of its mouth.

If the wyvem was to die, Tang realized, he would have to kill it. He swam toward the back of the cavern, angling toward a large block of stone that rose out of the water and leaned against his foe's rocky perch. The great reptile raised its neck, turning its head to track his progress.
As the prince neared his goal, the wyvem lifted its wings as though to take flight, then abruptly let them fall and reluctantly gathered its legs beneath its bulk.

If he turned back now, the wyvern would be too weak to follow him, but Tang had no desire to flee. He wanted to rescue his mother, and to do that he had to slay this beast. He reached the boulder and clambered out of the water, then started up the slippery limestone. The wyvem peered over the top, then turned sideways and whipped its poison-tipped tail toward his chest.

Tang brought his halberd around, slapping the

poisondripping barb aside with
the flat of the blade. In the same instant, he continued the motion, circling it
over the top of the wyvern's tail and bringing the head up on the inside. Had he
been fighting a man with a lance or spear, the maneuver would have sent his
foe's weapon flying away. In this case, it twined his polearm into the

powerful appendage. The prince clamped the shaft beneath his arms and held on
tight.

The reptile pulled its tail back to strike again, jerking
Tang up the boulder and swinging him across the stony ledge. He slammed into the
cavern wall and nearly blacked out as the breath exploded from his body. The
wyvern started to whip its tail back toward the boulder, nearly ripping the
halberd from Tang's grasp, then realized it was dragging something and
stopped. The misshapen head swung around and fixed an angry orange eye on the
prince, who began to wish he had not been so rash when he had had the chance to
flee.

Tang leapt over the tail, thereby freeing his halberd, and brought the blade
around in a quick arc. The sharp edge slashed through the scaly tendril and sent
the tail's poisonous barb skittering across the stones.

Even had he not felt the wyvem's hot breath washing over his back, Tang would have known what was coming next. He instantly pulled back, pushing the halberd butt into the air behind him, and smoothly switched stances so that he was facing the opposite direction. He found the wyvem's fang-filled jaws descending toward his head. The prince stepped forward to meet the attack, at the same time thrusting the butt of his weapon into the leathery ball lodged in the corner of the reptile's gaping maw.

The poison sack came loose and rolled deep into the wyvem's throat; then the beast's jaws snapped shut and severed the halberd shaft a hairbreadth above the prince's fingers. Tang started to shuffle backward, then saw a flash of motion in the corner of his eye and turned to dive off" the stony bench. The leathery wing caught him squarely in the back, launching him with such force that he sailed across the cavern and slammed into the far wall. His body erupted in pain; then he plunged into the black water.

Tang floated for a long time, too sore to breathe even if he had not been lying facedown in a pool of fetid swamp water. He ached from the tips of his fingers to the ends of

his toes, which was probably a good thing, since it meant the wyvern's blow

had not broken his back. He tried to take stock of other possible injuries, but
everything hurt too much to tell if any particular bone was broken or out of
joint. When the need to breathe finally grew sufficiently urgent, he tried to
roll onto his back and discovered the water was only knee-deep. He gathered
his legs beneath him and rose out of the water.

At first, Tang did not recognize the strange growling sound he heard and thought
perhaps the wyvern was coming after him. Then he recognized it as his own voice,
groaning in pain, and realized with a start that the voices of his dead soldiers
had fallen silent. In the dim light, he could barely make out the figure of the
great reptile across the cavern, lying on the ledge with its barbless tail and
one leathery wing dangling motionless over the side. There was a large black
bulge near the top of its scaly neck, and the amorphous mass that had once been
its head was so swollen that the flesh had split open.

"Two wyverns!" the prince whispered. "Perhaps I am fool, but no longer am I
coward!"

Even as he spoke them, Tang realized the words were not altogether true. There
were many forms of cowardice, some more important than others, and he could not
redeem himself through a single act of bravery. He turned toward the entrance of

the cavern and bowed in deep respect.

"Listen, 0 Yen-Wang-Yeh, Great Judge and King of Eighteen Hells." Tang spoke loudly and clearly, so that his ancestors might hear his words as well. "Listen and hear testimony of foolish Shou prince who squanders lives of General Fui D'hang and many dutiful soldiers..."

In the amber dawn light, even Ruha could see that the cart tracks led up the hill straight to the gloomy ruins of what had once been a many-spired fortress of hanging

bartizans and dark hoardings. Tombor had driven through a grimy stream at the edge of the small wood where Vaerana had stopped the column, and the wagon wheels had left a pair of dark lines in the center of the dusty road.

"I should have guessed," Vaerana growled. "The Night Castle."

"The Night Castle?" Ruha asked.

"We've chased cult assassins in there before," Vaeranp explained. "Whenever we do, the place fills with darkness. It'll be a hard thing to find Yanseldara's staff in that murk—especially if Cypress is there defending it."

Ruha glanced toward the eastern horizon, where the shrines of Temple Hill were silhouetted against At'ar's blazing golden orb. "The sun is rising; in a few minutes, my fire spells will be powerful enough to dispel even the thickest darkness."

"That won't do us any good, I'm afraid." Pierstar Hallowhand rode up to join Ruha and Vaerana. Behind him followed one of his gray-cloaked trackers and a bedraggled, long-bearded man who looked as frightened of his mount as he did the company of Maces gathered on the road. "If the staff was there, it's gone now."

"How can you know that?" Vaerana demanded.

"Longnose found a shepherd grazing his herd south of here." Pierstar motioned his scout to bring the bedraggled fellow forward, then nodded to the man. "Tell the Lady Constable what you saw last night."

The fellow snatched his grimy cap from his head and began to wring it in his hands, then stared at the ground beneath Vaerana's stirrups. "It was well past high night, ma'am," he began. "I was waked by me dogs howling, an' I heard a bell ringing, only it was real deep."

The man paused, which prompted Vaerana's gaze to snap

toward Pierstar. "I don't see what—"

"Let him finish," Pierstar said. Then, to the man, he ordered, "Go on, and be quick about it. Vaerana Hawklyn's not known for her patience."

Looking more frightened than ever, the man blurted, "It was maybe an hour later. My dogs went mad, an' I looked up and saw a dragon flying over. I thought I'd lost me herd an' me life too, but it just flew by." He pointed toward the Night Castle. "It landed in there. I'll tell you, ma'am, I rolled me blanket quick and started the herd for these woods, but the dragon was back in the air before I made a hundred paces—an' he was carryin' something real careful-like in his claws."

"What?" Vaerana demanded. "An oak staff with a big topaz pommel?"

It was Ruha who answered. "No. Cypress would not trust anyone else with that staff. It had to be the ylang blossoms."

"I don't know about your blossoms or your staff," said the man. "All I saw was a real fat cleric holding a big wooden cask, an' he looked about as scared as me."

"Then we've lost the trail." Vaerana did not curse or cry out; her shoulders

simply slumped forward. "Even if we knew where the lair was, we can't ride as
fast as
Cypress can fly."

"We have lost the trail, but not the battle," said Ruha.
"Minister Hsieh is pressing the real oil for us at the Ginger Palace. Perhaps
we should go and retrieve it; when
Cypress returns home and discovers that he has been deceived, he will come to
us."

Tang hurled the torch against the gray limestone, then sat upon a fallen
stalactite to contemplate the back wall of the cavern. He had explored every
nook, cranny and fissure without finding Cypress's lair. Not a single passage
large enough for a man, much less a dragon, led deeper into the mountain. The
prince had even scaled a giant-high dropblock to peer into the ceiling's shadowy
recesses, and he had seen nothing. It was as if Cypress vanished when he entered
the cavern.

Given that the dragon was more dead than alive, that seemed entirely possible.
Still, Tang had not yet searched one place, perhaps because if he found the
passage there, he stood every chance of dying in it.

The prince retrieved his guttering torch and climbed down to the pool. On the far bank, the cavern did not end in a true wall. The ceiling simply angled down and disappeared into the water, which was so fetid and brown with decay it was impossible to see a hand's span beneath the surface. The passage, if the cavern had one, could only be hidden there.

Tang returned to the small pile of equipment he had salvaged from his dugout and prepared for his dive. He folded his tinderbox into its oilcloth and knotted the ends together so they would not leak. He pushed the stopper well down into his oil flask and used a bootlace to fix it to his sword belt. He emptied his waterskin into the pool, then refilled it with several breaths of air and slung it around his neck. Finally, the prince uncoiled his rope, tying one end to his sword belt and the other to a small boulder at the edge of the pond.

Tang waded into the pool until it became chest-deep, then doused his torch and wedged it into his empty sword scabbard. In the dim swamp light filtering in from the cavern mouth, he could barely see the ceiling of the grotto, sloping down like the roof of some huge mouth.
He swam over to it and dove. The water turned instantly as thick and dark as plum wine. The prince rolled onto his back so he could use

his hands and feet to
push himself along the roof of the passage.

Tang's heart began to pound in his ears and his throat grew tight, but he gave
no thought to turning back. It was not that he felt no fear; on the contrary, he
was filled with a cold, queasy dread that made his hands shake and his bowels
churn. The thought occurred to him that the passage might have more than one
branch. He could easily be swimming into an underwater labyrinth; in such
suffocating darkness, he would never know it.

Dragging himself through the passage was hard work, and Tang's breath did not
last long. He turned over, then emptied his lungs into the black water. The
prince pulled his buoyant waterskin beneath his body and allowed it to press him
against the ceiling, then placed his lips over the mouth. Biting the stopper
between his teeth, he carefully opened the skin and allowed a stream of stale
air to seep into his chest. Closing the sack was more difficult. He had to use his fingers to push the stopper back into place, losing several
precious bubbles when he slipped the digits into the corner of his mouth.

Tang continued forward, if not growing less afraid, then at least growing more
accustomed to fear. Though he had lost all sense of direction, he no longer

worried about becoming lost. No matter how complicated the labyrinth, he could always follow the rope back. He filled his lungs from his air sack two more times, each time allowing a few cherished bubbles to slip along his cheek as he pushed the stopper back into place. Even that loss did not trouble him. If he ran out of air, it would be much easier to pull himself back to the pond than to crawl forward as he was doing. Then he would simply find a couple of extra waterskins and resume his explorations.

A flicker of orange-yellow light caught Tang's eye, and he began to hope it would not be necessary to turn around. He dragged himself forward. When the flicker became a diffuse gold-red gleam pushing its way through the murky water, he realized he had to be nearing Cypress's lair. The glow was the color of flame, and fires do not burn underwater. More importantly, where there was light, Lady Feng was also bound to be. The prince pulled himself forward with renewed vigor—only to come to an abrupt stop as he reached the end of the rope.

Tang did not even consider going back for another length of rope. Instead, he sucked the last dregs of air from his waterskin, then untied himself and swam toward the light. He began to count heartbeats, not because he feared he would drown before he reached the

end of the passage, but to give him some idea of how far it was back to the
rope. The golden glow brightened slowly. His count had reached thirty by the
time it was ab large as a head. At fifty, his lungs began to ache for air, and
the light was no larger than a harvest moon. When the count reached seventy, his
limbs grew so heavy and weak that he could hardly move them. Yellow-orange
radiance filled the whole passage ahead, and still the ceiling held Tang beneath
the water.

The prince blew out the last of his breath and swam another dozen strokes. His
count reached a hundred and ten, and the orange glow was so bright that he could
see his hands silhouetted against it. His heart began to beat faster, pounding
inside his chest like a forge's trip hammer, and a trickle of sweet-tasting
water seeped between his lips. At the count of a hundred and thirty, the golden
light began to sparkle and shimmer, and the prince realized he had made a
terrible mistake. Whatever it was, this radiance was too strong, too brilliant
to be firelight.
Perhaps his testimony to the Chief Judge had come too late; perhaps the spirits
of his dead soldiers, angry at his hesitation, had created the luminescence to
trick him.

One hundred and sixty…

The ceiling lifted off of Tang's back, and his head suddenly popped out of the water. With a great, racking groan, he sucked in the musty cave air, continuing until it seemed his lungs would burst. An orchestra of blissful purling echoed all around the prince, giving him the feeling that he had died and, despite his many faults, surfaced in the Land of Extreme Felicity. He exhaled and drew in even more air, as though he were trying to drain the cavern of its last wisp of dank atmosphere.

The chamber itself only added to Tang's impression that he had surfaced in a place of eternal paradise. The ceiling and walls were draped with jewelry both ancient and new: thumb-sized diamonds set into gold rings, blood-red rubies strung end-to-end in long chains, emeralds as large as cat eyes dangling from ear clips of pure

platinum. From dozens of ancillary passages poured streams large and small, all passing over beds of pearl and opal before they fell into a sparkling lake that filled the lower half of the cavern.

Unlike the brown soup at the other end of the passage, the waters here were as clear as glass, and the bottom of the entire pool was covered by minted coins of

every imaginable size and kingdom. A short swim away, the coins rose up to form
the glistening beach of an island made entirely of precious ingots—and more gold
than silver. In the center of the isle stood a single oaken staff—no doubt
Yanseldara's—with three gnarled branches rising at the top to grasp a huge
orange topaz. From the depths of this gem burned the fiery light that
illuminated the entire chamber, glimmering so brilliantly that the prince could
hardly make out the form of the tall, willowy woman standing beside it.

"Lady Feng!" Tang swam to the island, then stopped on the shore and bowed to his
mother. "Will Third Virtuous
Concubine honor her humble son with audience?"

The woman stepped away from the staff and peered down the slope at her son.
Unlike most Shou women, she showed every day of her age—and then some. She wore
her gray hair pulled into a tight bun that did little to lessen its unruly
appearance, and her skin was as ashen and flaky as lizard scales. The
crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes fanned out like spiderwebs to veil her
entire face, while the curious way that she cocked her head only emphasized the
contrast between the pop-eye through which she saw the outer world and the
squinty white orb that was usually turned inward to watch the spirit world.

"Tang!" she said at last. "What do you do here?"

"I come to rescue you, Lady Feng." The prince held his bow. It was not unusual to have an entire conversation with the Third Virtuous Concubine without receiving permission to rise. It was a good thing she was not a queen; he would have had to kowtow. "I also come to destroy Cypress's spirit gem."

"No. You mustn't!" She began to pick her way down the ingot slope. "Cypress would know!"

"It does not matter. He already tries to kill me for rescuing you."

"You risk life?" Lady Feng slapped Tang on the back of the head. "You are Shou prince!"

"Rescuing you is only way to redeem honor of Ginger Palace."

"Do I ask to be rescued?" Lady Feng grabbed Tang's chin and pulled his head up, then waved her arm around the glittering chamber. "Here is more wealth than all Imperial treasuries!"

Tang scowled at this, for his mother had always been too wise to value wealth

above freedom. "What good are these riches? Whole room of gold and diamonds is
worth less than nothing if it makes prisoner of you."

Lady Feng's squinty eye rolled in its socket, perhaps in dim recognition of the
wisdom she herself had imparted to the prince. Her pop-eye, however, darted
around the room from bauble to bauble, as though checking to be certain that
each one remained in its place.

"Do not argue!" she ordered. "Wealth shown is wealth lost to thieves."

Tang shook his head sadly. "You have dragon sickness."
He started up the ingot slope. "Show me where Cypress hides spirit gem; then we
leave."

"Go no farther, Tang."

Tang stopped in his tracks. When Lady Feng assumed that tone, she was not a
woman to be trifled with. His mother was capable of killing a man with the
merest wisp of an incantation. Though he believed she loved him as any mother
loved her child, she was a Scholar ofYen-
Wang-Yeh, and to scholars of the Great Judge, life and death were merely aspects
of one existence; even a son could not be sure his mother would care which state
he happened to occupy.

After a moment's consideration, Tang realized how to solve

his dilemma. He faced
his cronish mother. "I only

try to protect your treasure, Lady Feng. Cypress thinks it belongs to him. We
must destroy him."

Lady Feng's pop-eye flashed in anger, but the squinty one rolled around to study
him. It was horribly bloodshot, with a milky iris and a black pupil that seemed
as deep as the Well of Eighteen Hells itself, and Tang had not seen it since he
was a little boy.

"Tang, you try to trick me?"

For the first time since his battle with the wyverns,
Tang felt like a coward. He let his gaze drop and nodded.
"But only to protect you from Cypress. Whether you understand or not, dragon
sickness has made you his prisoner more than chains."

The squinty eye trembled as though from a palsy, but continued to linger on
Tang's face for a long time. At last,
Lady Feng said, "Tunnel is long. If we destroy spirit gem, how do we escape?"

"We carry extra air." To demonstrate, Tang opened his water skin and filled it
with breath. "Then I pull us through passage on rope I leave tied to other end."

Lady Feng eyed the air sack for a long time, then reluctantly

nodded. "But we do not smash gem until we are outside." The squinty eye rolled back into her head, and she added, "Then we destroy Cypress and come back to cave of wealth!"

"Of course—if that is truly wish of Third Virtuous Concubine." Tang ran a troubled eye over the glittering chamber; a month ago, his mother would have looked on the vast treasure with the mocking disdain of one who recognized such things as a worldly illusion. Now, it was all too easy to imagine Lady Feng returning to live out her life among these lonely riches. "Perhaps we even build palace for you."

A pithy smile crept across the gray lips of the Third Virtuous Concubine. "Most excellent idea. You know where to find spirit gem?"

"Cypress wishes to be with love. Gem can be only one place." Tang looked at the glowing gem in Yanseldara's

staff. "I get staff. You gather your things."

As the prince turned to climb the ingots, a gentle wave rolled up the beach, stirring the precious coins and soaking his feet to the ankles. Tang scowled at the rising water, trying to imagine what might have caused the surge.

Lady Feng grabbed his arm and shoved him into the water. "You must hide! Cypress returns!"

Fourteen

At the far end of the Ginger Palace's long audience hall, the new chamberlain drew aside two silk draperies and opened a pair of teak doors. A double column of Minister Hsieh's yellowcloaked guards marched into the room and split, one line filing to each side of Ruha and Vaerana. Behind the warriors followed a parade of servants bearing a triangular table, three teak chairs, and a tray with a steaming teapot and a trio of tiny, deep bowls.

As Hsieh's men took their positions, Vaerana scowled and leaned close to Ruha. "I don't know why I listen to you. This is going to be worse than Voonlar. They mean to take us prisoner."

"You are too suspicious, Vaerana. They intend nothing of the kind."

"Then why so many guards?"

"They are only for ceremony." Ruha shook her head at the Lady Constable's suspicions, remembering how easily

Minister Hsieh had disabled Wei Dao. "The mandarin is quite capable of defending himself."

Vaerana sneered doubtfully, but fell silent as the servants arrived with the furniture. They put the table on the chamber's exquisite floor mosaic, carefully arranging it so the point of the triangle stood over the head of the flame-tailed bird and the base faced Ruha and the Lady Constable. They placed two chairs on the women's side and positioned the third one before the tip of the table.

The man bearing the tea tray stepped to one side, then stood at attention while Minister Hsieh, with Yu Po following close behind, entered the room.

The mandarin glided across the floor to the point of the table, then bowed to his guests. Ruha returned the gesture, making certain to bend lower than her host, but Vaerana barely nodded. Yu Po pulled the mandarin's chair out. A pair of servants stepped forward to do likewise for the witch and Lady Constable.

Vaerana astonished the servant by taking her own chair and placing it opposite the tea bearer. She dropped heavily into the seat, then braced her elbows on the

table and faced Hsieh.

"The witch tells me you have some ylang oil."

Yu Po's face turned instantly scarlet. He slipped around Hsieh's chair. "You are
ill-bred daughter of—"

"Yu Po!" Hsieh waited for his adjutant to stop, then waved at the tea tray. "You
may serve."

Yu Po's jaw dropped, as did that of the tea bearer and the other servants; then
the adjutant bowed to his master and stepped to obey.

Hsieh smiled at Vaerana. "Yes, ylang oil is ready." He looked to Ruha. "Where is
Lady Feng?"

The witch found it difficult to meet the mandarin's gaze. "I am afraid we do not
know." She saw Hsieh's lips tighten and had the cold, sinking feeling that she
was doomed to appear a failure to everyone she met. "We were not able to follow
the spy when he fled to the lair."

The handle of the teapot nearly slipped from Yu Po's grasp, and the lid clinked
loudly.

The mandarin frowned at his adjutant's clumsiness, then asked, "Then Lady Feng
cannot tell you where to find lair?"

"Vaerana is… reluctant… to use your potion on Yanseldara." Ruha cast an uncomfortable glance at the Lady Constable, who set her jaw and showed no sign of

feeling uncomfortable about her mistrust of the Shou. "I am sorry."

Yu Po finished pouring and set the teapot back on the tray, then picked up one
of the tiny bowls and looked uncertain as to where he should place it. Minister
Hsieh graciously gestured to Ruha, and the adjutant placed the vessel on the
table before her. When he started to set the next cup before Vaerana, however,
the mandarin scowled harshly and cleared his throat. The young man paled and
nearly sloshed tea on the table as he swung his hand toward his master.

If the snub troubled Vaerana, she showed no sign. "I don't want to strain Yanseldara. She's not strong enough."

Hsieh waited for Yu Po to set a bowl before the Lady Constable, then picked up his own tea. Ruha slipped her cup beneath her veil and
also sipped her drink, but Vaerana pretended not to see the steaming vessel
before her.

The mandarin returned his bowl to the table. "Whether Lady Yanseldara drinks potion is for Moonstorm House to decide, of course."
Hsieh turned back to Ruha. "But if you do not know where to find lair, why do
you need ylang oil?"

"Perhaps you have caught Winter Blossom?" Ruha asked. "We do know the general direction to the lair. If we carry the familiar close enough, he will lead us to Lady Feng."

Minister Hsieh shook his head. "The lemur eludes us. I fear he goes to hunt for his mistress." He looked back to Vaerana. "It appears we have only one way to find Lady Feng—or Lady Yanseldara's missing staff."

"I'm not going to pour your cricket juice down Yanseldara's throat," Vaerana declared. "It was Shou magic that put her into catalepsy in the first place."

"And it is only Shou magic that can cure her," Hsieh reminded her. "Compared to need to reunite body with spirit, risk to Lady Yanseldara is small."

"I said no."

Hsieh nodded politely. "Very well. Lady Feng is in no danger, but until you find staff—and Third Virtuous Concubine—you have no need of ylang oil."

Vaerana's eyes flashed silver. "You're threatening me?"

"I state fact." Hsieh sipped his tea, then said, "Until you find Lady Yanseldara's spirit and free it from staff, ylang oil does no good. There is no reason to give it to you."

"No reason?" Vaerana stood, knocking her chair over. "I'll give you reason!"

"Vaerana, sit down!" Ruha urged. "It would be foolish to—"

The witch's warning was too late. Vaerana reached for Hsieh's collar.

The mandarin flung hot tea into the Lady Constable's eyes and bent toward the floor, ducking her grab easily. Without putting his tea bowl aside, he cupped his free hand behind her heel and pulled her foot off the ground. Vaerana lost her balance and fell over backward, landing on her chair and smashing it into pieces. The tips of a dozen long-bladed Shou halberds instantly touched her throat. A dozen more encircled Ruha.

Slowly, Ruha placed both her hands on the table and glanced down at Vaerana. A red mask had formed around the Lady Constable's eyes where the tea had scalded her, but the way she was blinking suggested she was more astonished than injured.

"Vaerana, if you value your life—or at least Yanseldara's—do not move," Ruha advised. "Allow me to explain the situation to Minister Hsieh, and I'm certain he—"

"You don't have to explain anything," Vaerana snarled.

"All Minister Hsieh needs to know is that Pierstar's waiting outside with a
hundred Maces. If I don't join him with a cask of ylang oil in the next twenty
minutes, there'll soon be another two thousand—and they won't be in a patient
mood."

Hsieh rose, very slowly.

Ruha said, "Minister, let me explain—"

The mandarin waved her silent, a command that was

instantly enforced as his guards touched their halberd tips to her throat.
Hsieh stepped over to Vaerana and peered down at her supine form.

"Since you know nothing but threat, we converse in manner you understand. First
threat: If you try to touch me again, I snap offending arm. Second threat: If we
do not find Lady Feng, you do not receive ylang oil, and
Lady Yanseldara dies. Final threat: If Maces do not withdraw from grounds of
Ginger Palace immediately, my guards slay them all. Then they slay your family,
your servants, and everyone inside Moonstorm House."

Vaerana met the mandarin's icy glare with one of her own. "No one threatens
Yanseldara or Moonstorm House.
One way or—"

"Vaerana, you have the manners of a jackal!" Ruha barked.

"If you say another word, I swear by the name of my father that I shall let the Shou cut your throat, and save Yanseldara without you!"

The Lady Constable looked at Ruha with the stunned expression of a sheikh being dressed down by the tribe beggar. Before Vaerana could recover from her shock, the witch turned her attention to the angry mandarin.

"And Minister Hsieh, your guards will not slay anyone inside Moonstorm House—or Elversult." Several halberds pricked Ruha's skin menacingly, but she ignored them. "There is no time for a battle—at least not now. If you wish to see Lady Feng or Yanseldara alive again, you must work together."

"I have no need to work with this woman," Hsieh snarled. "Lady Feng is in no danger."

"I am sorry to tell you she is—and also everyone inside the Ginger Palace." When Hsieh scowled, Ruha hastened to add, "I do not speak of Vaerana's Maces. I am speaking of Cypress. We must take the ylang oil and flee before the dragon discovers his spy's mistake."

"Do not lie to me," Hsieh said. "I see you destroy dragon."

"You saw me destroy his body, not his spirit," Ruha

said. "Do you not remember that he was undead? He has taken a new body."

Hsieh glared at the witch. "How long do you know this?"

"That does not matter." Ruha saw no use in lying; the mandarin had already guessed the truth. "What is important is that we leave before Cypress comes. If you allow him to have the oil now, you will never see Lady Feng again."

It was Yu Po who posed the question Ruha had been anticipating since they left the Night Castle. "Forgive me for speaking, Esteemed Mandarin, but perhaps we make bargain with dragon for return of Lady Feng?"

Ruha was spared the necessity of pointing out the suggestion's folly when Hsieh shot the adjutant an impatient glower. "Only fool bargains with angry dragon."

Yu Po's face reddened with embarrassment, but he was determined to redeem himself. He puffed out his chest. "I am not afraid, Worthy Minister. When I explain how witch deceives us—"

"If Cypress promises to return Lady Feng, who will cast the spell?" Ruha interrupted. "And after you give him the ylang oil, why would he return such a valuable hostage—and one who may well have the power to undo what he has worked

so hard to do?"

Yu Po scowled at the witch and started to reply, but Hsieh raised a hand to silence him. "Say no more, Yu Po. Perhaps Lady Ruha neglects to tell us about dragon's new body, but that does not make her wrong now. Go now, and prepare my guards to ride!"

Tang stopped well back in the cramped passage, where it branched into three smaller tunnels. The limestone felt almost slimy beneath his sodden boots, and the trill of the tiny stream echoed surprisingly loud in his ears. Stooping over so he would not hit his head on the low ceiling, he

turned around and kneeled, his legs straddling the rivulet. The mouth of his hiding place was wide enough that he could see most of the ingot island, where Lady Feng stood beside Yanseldara's staff, calmly awaiting Cypress's arrival. Though the prince judged no man could see him hiding so far back in the passage, he had no idea whether the darkness would also conceal him from the empty-eyed dragon. He would find out soon enough, for it seemed unlikely the beast would waste much time before searching out the slayer of his pet wyverns.

A tremendous sloshing sounded from the treasure chamber;

then Cypress's head
rose into view beyond the island. The dragon appeared larger than even the night
before, with horns as long as lances and a snout the size of a horse. He spread
his wings, concealing the entire far wall of the cavern, and water poured down
the dull scales in cataracts. He waded forward, rising high above the island as
he climbed the beach of tinkling coins. Tang could see that Cypress carried a
brown-cloaked figure in the talons of one hand.

The dragon paused beside the island and lowered his claw to the summit of the
ingot heap. A plump, wide-eyed man clutching a small wooden cask crawled off,
then collapsed to his knees and stared gaped-mouthed at the sparkling chamber
around him. Cypress turned his vacant-eyed gaze on Lady Feng and dropped Tang's
rope at her feet.

"I see some of your son's men survived." The dragon's booming words echoed off
the stony walls like drum music. "Where are they? I would repay them for the
pain they caused my pets."

When he heard Cypress assume it had taken a whole party to kill the wyverns,
Tang's heart swelled with pride. Then it occurred to the prince that his
mother's captor had spoken aloud, and the air inside his inflated chest turned
cold and sickening. If the dragon could talk again, he could

speak spell
incantations and, no doubt, breathe acid. The prince felt as if he had chased a

chameleon into the brush and found a crocodile waiting instead.

The Third Virtuous Concubine studied the rope at her feet, then craned her neck
to fix her outward-looking eye on the dragon. "I know nothing of Prince Tang's
men."

Cypress snorted wisps of black fume into the air, then dropped his head and held
one gaping eye socket over
Lady Feng's head. "Why are you lying? Perhaps you think these men can steal my
treasure for you?"

Lady Feng's bulging eye looked as though it might pop from the socket. She
slipped away from the dragon and started toward the man with the cask, clearly
anxious to change the subject.

"Who is this fool? I do not ask for company."

The tactic seemed to work, for a crooked grin inched up the length of Cypress's
snout. "He is not company; he is my spy."

The plump man rose and bowed to Lady Feng. "Tombor the Jolly at your service.
Virtuous Concubine."

Lady Feng's squinty eye swung outward to gaze the man up and down, then rolled back to its original position. "I have no need of your service; you worship god of masks and betrayal. But I warn you, sentence of Number Six Court is sure to be harsh. Do not die before redeeming yourself."

Tombor's florid face paled, and he looked quickly away from Lady Feng. "I was only offering a greeting, but I shall remember your advice." He snatched up the cask he had brought and held it before him. "I have here the ylang oil you need."

Lady Feng looked at the keg, then slowly turned to face Cypress, who still wore the same crooked grin upon his long snout. "Now?"

"Of course now!" Cypress's grumbling voice spread across the water in dancing ripples. "I have been ready for weeks."

Lady Feng let her shoulders slump. "As you wish, then."

She crooked a finger at Tombor, then turned toward a small coffer of polished mahogany sitting on the near side of the island. The Third Virtuous Concubine kneeled on a small ingot terrace before the chest, then had Tombor place the cask he had brought beside it. She opened the chest and removed several bundles

carefully wrapped in waxed silk.

A painful lump formed in the pit of Tang's stomach. The Third Virtuous Concubine had already prepared the other ingredients; it would take her only a few moments to mix the potion and cast the enchantment that would forever unite Yanseldara's spirit with Cypress. The prince crawled forward, struggling to think of some way short of matricide to stop his mother from finishing her spell.

Cypress climbed onto the far shore and stretched his neck over the summit of the little island, cocking his hideous head so that one empty eye socket hung directly above the Third Virtuous Concubine. Lady Feng had Tombor remove the top of the oil cask; then she suddenly drew back and wrinkled her nose.

"Is something wrong?" Cypress demanded.

"Only horrible smell." Lady Feng took a deep breath, then leaned forward to peer into the cask.

Tang stopped a pace short of the mouth of the passage. He could go no farther without exposing himself to the dragon's view—if he had not already—and still he did not know how to stop his mother. He was surprised to realize that failure mattered to him greatly, and not only because he wanted

to impress Lady Ruha by saving Yanseldara.
To a great extent, his weakness was responsible for the peril of both the Ruling
Lady and his mother; unless he set matters right, he would always be the same
cowardly, foolish prince he had been before entering the swamp.

Lady Feng pulled back from the cask and carefully unwrapped one other silken
bundles. Tang saw that he had a clear angle to the little keg. He wished for a
crossbow so he could pierce the side—and at last one desperate

idea occurred to him. The prince retreated into the passage and found a
smooth, fist-sized rock. He tore the lapel off his fighting tunic, then fit the
stone into the middle of it and stepped into the mouth of the tunnel. The
passage was too small for a circular windup, so he simply cocked his arm back
and hoped a simple whip-stroke would be powerful enough to span the distance.

Cypress's head instantly swiveled in Tang's direction, and the prince knew he
did not have time to wait for his mother to move away from the ylang oil. He
fixed his aim on the plump figure of Tombor the Jolly, who was standing on the
hill above the cask, and snapped his arm forward.

The rock arced over the lake as fast as a shooting star.

The shot was not a particularly difficult one, and it appeared the stone would strike its target square in the chest—not enough to kill the husky man, but certain to knock him from his feet and send him tumbling down the slope to spill the ylang oil.

Then, as the rock reached the shore of the ingot island, Cypress lowered his head. The stone bounced off the dragon's skull and splashed into the water. Lady Feng spun around, her gaze instantly rising to the passage where Tang now stood trembling, not so much in fear as in frustration. The dragon turned his head slightly and brought both eye sockets to bear on the prince.

"It seems your son has found his courage, Lady Feng."
"He finds courage, but he is still foolish boy." The Third Virtuous Concubine waved her fingers at Tang, urging him to retreat deeper into his passage. "Mighty dragon has nothing to fear from him."

"He killed my wyverns." Cypress started to circle the island. "And he was trying to spill the ylang oil."

Tang backed deeper into the passage, more because his mother had urged him to than because he imagined it would save him from the dragon. There was no hope now of stopping the spell, and he felt like a hopeless failure. He still feared death, of course, but only marginally more

than he feared thinking of himself as a bumbling fool for the rest of his
life.

By the time Cypress rounded the island, Tang could see little more than the
dragon's dull scales growing larger and darker as they neared the tunnel mouth.
He reached the triple fork where he had stopped before and glanced up each
branch. Two of the passages vanished into inky blackness, but one, the smallest,
curved back toward the lake. There was a pale yellow glow at the far end,
suggesting it actually connected with the vast treasure chamber.

"Cypress, stop!" Lady Feng's voice was so muffled Tang could barely hear it. "If
you love Yanseldara, you spare boy's life."

The dragon pivoted to look down at the island, allowing Tang a clear view of
his mother. Lady Feng had grabbed the lip of the open oil cask and tipped it
forward.
The contents were dangerously close to spilling.

"Pour it out, Wise Mother!" Tang yelled. "Life and death are same; I fear only
dishonor!"

The Third Virtuous Concubine frowned in the direction of Tang's voice. "Then
you are fool, Impertinent Son.
You know nothing of life and death. If you do not understand

that, you
understand nothing at all!"

"What?" Tang gasped. If there was one thing his mother believed, it was that
life and death were the same.

Lady Feng tipped the cask forward until the contents began to trickle down the
side. Tombor the Jolly stooped over to reach for the other side of the cask,
then found himself staring at a scorpion knife the Third Virtuous
Concubine had produced from her sleeve pocket. The cleric withdrew his hand, and
Lady Feng fixed her gaze on Cypress.

"Do you wish to have Yanseldara?" She tipped the cask forward even farther, and
the trickle of oil became a steady stream. "Or not?"

"Very well. I am in a generous mood." Cypress waved

Tombor away from the cask, then stepped away from
Tang's passage. "I absolve the prince of his transgressions."

Tang did not believe the dragon for a moment, and knew that his mother would not
either. Like any tyrant,
Cypress could not forgive a rebellion against his authority. Once Lady Feng
cast her spell, he would take his vengeance. So why was the Third Virtuous
Concubine pretending to believe him? And why had she

called the prince ignorant
for quoting her?

She had tipped the cask. The Third Virtuous Concubine was trying to tell him
something about the oil.

When Cypress turned his attention back to Lady
Feng's preparations. Tang began to collect the largest stones he could find,
piling them inside the small passage that curved back toward the lake. As soon
as the prince judged he had enough to suit his purpose, he removed his clothes.
He laid his battle tunic on the far side of the tunnel, arranging it over a
boulder so that it would look as if he were crouching on the floor, with his
back to the treasure chamber.

Lady Feng closed her mahogany coffer, and Tang knew she was getting ready to
cast the spell. He laid down on his belly and crawled backward into the smallest
passage, dragging his undertunic, trousers, and sword belt after him. The
tunnel was so low that he could feel his back touching the ceiling. The prince
began to stack the stones he gathered, scraping his elbows raw as he struggled
to move in the cramped confines. The little bit of dim light vanished entirely,
and he had to work in the dark, trying to feel the shapes of the rocks so he
could fit them into the available spaces as tightly as possible.

His wall had nearly reached the ceiling when Tang heard his mother's muffled
voice mumbling a command
Though he could not understand her words, he suspected she was calling for
Yanseldara's staff. In his mind's eye, the prince saw her accept the pole from
Tombor—would the traitor's hands be trembling at the magnitude of his

crime?—and dip the butt into the ylang potion.

As though on cue, the Third Virtuous Concubine's voice began muttering the
indiscernible syllables of her spell. Tang fed his undertunic through the narrow
gap at the top of his little wall, stopping when he judged the tail would be
touching the floor. He worked carefully, for he had plenty of time. It would
take a few moments for the potion to work its magic, and, even then. Cypress
would be in no hurry. The dragon would want to rejoice in his triumph and be
certain the enchantment had worked before betraying his word.

Holding his undertunic against the ceiling with one hand and struggling to move
stones with the other. Tang laid the last row of his wall. He folded the top of
his shirt over his side of the barrier, using the extra rocks to anchor it in
place. That done, he tore his trousers into strips and used them to plug the

small gaps around the edges. The barricade would not stop the dragon's breath
entirely, but it would absorb the brunt of the attack and, with a little luck,
send the acid cloud boiling down tunnels that offered less resistance.

Tang located his sword belt and crawled backward down the tiny passage. He felt
the stone around him shudder as Cypress rumbled in astonishment, and the prince
knew his mother had completed her spell. What had she been trying to tell him
about the oil? Tang could think of only one thing: somehow, Tombor had pressed
the wrong blossoms.

The prince felt the wall disappear beside his left foot and realized he had
reached another fork. The side passage was not large enough for him to crawl
into, but he was able to cram his legs in far enough to turn around and slither
down the tunnel headfirst. The glow from the treasure chamber ahead had changed
from bright yellow to a brilliant ruby red, and he could hear Cypress speaking
in his deep dragon voice.

"Why is her spirit so—so pained? The spell couldn't have worked!"

"I do not promise love feels good," Lady Feng countered. "You share what

Yanseldara's spirit feels, and she shares what you feel. If she suffers, that is
your fault, not mine."

The ingot island appeared in the mouth of the passage, and Tang stopped
crawling. Cypress sat on the beach of coins, bending forward over Lady Feng and
Tombor, who were standing near the summit of the isle. The dragon was holding
Yanseldara's staff in the palm of his withered hand, his bony snout almost
touching the fiery topaz set in the pommel.

"Then I have her?" Cypress closed the staff inside his claw. "Yanseldara is
entirely mine?"

Lady Feng nodded. "Until potion wears off, yes. After that, what happens is
between your spirit and hers."

"Until it wears off?" Cypress's roar was so loud that several pieces of jewelry
fell into the lake. His empty claw flashed down and plucked up Lady Feng. "You
told me the spell would last forever!"

"Your spy does not bring correct oil." Lady Pong's voice betrayed no hint of
fear, and she stared into Cypress's eye voids without wavering. "He brings oil
made from blossoms picked at night. They are not as potent as blossoms picked
in morning."

"Ruha!" Tombor gasped. "That hag!"

Cypress's muzzle swung toward his spy, whose eye? suddenly grew as round as his face. The cleric began to stumble down the slope away from the dragon, and Tang felt like a new man.

"The Harper witch s-s-said they were the blossoms Hsieh b-brought," Tombor stammered. "She tricked me!"

"How unfortunate."

Tombor clasped his hands in supplication and craned his neck to look up at the dragon. "Please, 1-let me go back! I'll k-kill the Harper! I can get the b-blossoms you need!"

"If that is true, why did you not bring them in the first place?" A white glimmer flashed deep within Cypress'fr

empty eye sockets; then he said, "Perhaps you knew you had the wrong oil, hmmnim? Perhaps you were hungry for my gold?"

Tombor dropped to his knees and tugged at the silver chain around his neck, pulling a gray velvet mask from inside his cloak. He pressed the disguise over his eyes, then began, "Unseen Mask, Great Lord of Shadows and Master of Deceit, hear the prayer of your most devoted servant—

"Why do you pray to the King of Betrayal?" Cypress lowered his claw and, with a single black talon, flicked the gray mask away from Tombor's face. "Do you think he will give you your reward?"

Tombor threw his arms over his face and tried to turn away, but the dragon was already inside his mind. A terrified howl echoed off the cavern walls; then the plump traitor began to pack gold ingots inside his clothes, his stiff and jerky arms obviously moving against his will.

Once his robe was loaded, he filled his arms and waddled down to the lake's edge, then threw himself into the clear waters. He sank like a stone.

The cleric held his breath for a long time, and Tang could see him still clutching his armload of gold ingots.

At last, a long stream of bubbles streamed from his nostrils; then he opened his mouth and filled his lungs with water.

Cypress turned away from the traitor and raised Lady Feng to his face. "Now, what shall I do about you? You knew when you opened the cask that it was the wrong oil."

"It makes no difference—if you have confidence in your own spirit," Lady Feng said. "After potion wears off, you can subdue Yanseldara's spirit and make her your slave."

It astonished Tang to hear Lady Feng toying so boldly with the dragon. She knew Cypress loved Yanseldara only because no one else had ever bested him in battle. Considering that the first combat had cost him his life, it seemed unlikely he would welcome another fight for an even greater prize.

Wisps of black fume curled from Cypress's nostrils, but when he spoke, he sounded more apprehensive than angry. "I do not want to make a slave of Yanseldara." He lowered the Third Virtuous Concubine to the ingot heap and allowed her to step off his hand. "I want her to love me, as I love her."

"You want to absorb her," Lady Feng scoffed. "She is stronger than you, and you want to make her part of yourself."

"Yes, to make her mine. Is that not what love is?" The dragon glanced toward the cavern where Tang had first taken refuge. "I'm certain your son would agree—though I'm afraid I can't allow him that chance."

"You leave son alone!" Lady Feng warned. "If you harm him—"

Cypress whirled on the Third Virtuous Concubine so fiercely that Tang feared he would murder her.

"I will kill him, and you will do nothing!" the dragon roared. "I have allowed
you both to grow defiant, and now I must teach you to obey."

Lady Feng dropped to her knees, then surprised Tang by kowtowing to the
dragon—dishonoring both herself and the emperor. "Please. He is only son. Punish
me—"

"I need you."

Cypress drew himself to his full height, then turned
Yanseldara's staff upside down and wedged the butt into a ceiling fissure. The
dragon waded into the lake. Tang retreated deep into his worm hole, beseeching
his ancestors to make his foe see only the cowardly prince he had been before
entering the swamp.

As Cypress neared the cavern wall, his great bulk blocked the red light from the
treasure chamber, plunging the prince into darkness so thick he could not see
the stone beneath his nose. The cavern shuddered around his body, and the
dragon's voice rumbled through the very rock.

"... not changed after all, have you, Prince?"

There was a muffled whisper as the dragon inflated

his chest, then a sharp hiss as he emptied it into the next tunnel. The

exhalation seemed to continue forever, and soon a chorus of soft, eerie trills
arose from the treasure chamber as the breath whistled through the network of
passages and found its way back toward the lake. From deep within Tang's worm
hole came a muffled clatter of stones, followed by the sputter and sizzle of
dissolving limestone. The prince smelled the caustic stench of acid and expected
to feel a stinging wind tear over his body, but the wall had not collapsed
entirely. He felt only the light nettling of a faint mist. He crawled forward as
far as he dared, and at last the eerie whistle died away.

Cypress stepped away from the cavern wall and turned toward the ingot island.
Lady Feng threw herself into the water, wailing in motherly grief. The show was
so convincing that, had Tang not been raised in the palace of the Third
Virtuous Concubine, he would have believed her anguish to be genuine.

Cypress waded across the lake in two strides and plucked Lady Feng from the
water. "Be quiet! That coward is not worth tears. He was groveling in the
corner like a frightened child."

The report only drew louder wails from the Third Virtuous Concubine.

The dragon placed her atop the ingot heap, then circled to the far side of the

island. "I will fetch the proper oil. When I return, have your ingredients ready
to cast another spell—the permanent one."

Lady Feng raised her head. "Never! I let Yanseldara make slave of you!"

Cypress's claw swept down so swiftly that Tang did not see it move. It simply
appeared beside Lady Feng's body, trembling with the dragon's fury, and the
prince did not even realize it had touched her until he saw the blood seeping
through her shredded cheosong.

"We shall see, shall we?"

The dragon dove into the lake and vanished from sight. Both Tang and his mother
remained motionless

and did not speak for several minutes. When it became apparent that Cypress
would not return, Lady Feng turned toward the prince's hiding place.

"Are you there, Tang? I know you are fool, but honored ancestors claim you are
no coward."

Tang pushed his head out of his worm hole. "I am here
I see you kowtow to Cypress!"

Lady Feng shrugged. "I must convince him of grief
Besides, shame is removed after you destroy him." She

craned her neck to look at
the staff lodged in the ceiling, thirty feet above her head. "Now, Courageous
Prince, please to honor humble mother by climbing up to retrieve spirit gem."

* * * * «

Ruha urged her horse forward, once again nudging it between the mounts of
Minister Hsieh and the Lady Constable. Vaerana had been on her best behavior
since departing the Ginger Palace, but with the wooded hills of
Elversult rising ahead and the planning session entering a crucial phase, the
witch thought it wise to put herself between the two stubborn personalities.

"Very well. We hide Lady Yanseldara and ylang o beneath city prison while we
search for lair," Hsieh said
"But who stays to guard them?"

"It's the Maces' barracks," Vaerana answered simply.

"Humble Minister begs to disagree." Hsieh's tone was anything but humble. "Maces
know nearby lands. Perhaps they search for lair while Shou guard oil."

Vaerana leaned in front of Ruha, her face already turning the color of blood.
"If you think I'm going to leave
Elversult in the hands of a bunch of slanty—"

Ruha pushed the Lady Constable back toward her own horse. "The minister's
suggestion has merit, Vaerana
Perhaps it would be best to leave a mixed garrison at the barracks, and lend him
some guides to help his men search for the lair."

Vaerana clamped her mouth shut and took several deep breaths, then nodded
curtly. "We can do that."

Hsieh looked straight ahead. "As can we—for mutual benefit of all."

Ruha's sigh of relief was cut short by a chorus of alarmed cries. She turned in
her saddle and looked down the long column to see riders of both races staring
over their shoulders. They were tugging at armor buckles and tightening chin
straps and generally readying themselves for battle. For a moment, the witch
could not imagine what was troubling them, but then she saw it: a pair of
distant black wings hanging low in the afternoon sky, steadily flapping and
growing larger with every stroke.

"Most wretched dragon!"

"Elversult's just over the hill," Vaerana said. "We'll skirt the edge and make a
run for Moonstonn House!"

"We secure ylang oil first—then fetch Yanseldara!"

"This is my city. I know what's—"

"You are both wrong." Ruha kept her eyes fixed on Cypress, who had already covered so much distance she could make out the lines of his broken horns. "We cannot hope to outrun the dragon, so we must outwit him."

Vaerana and Hsieh both studied the witch for a moment, then nodded their agreement. "What do you have in mind, Witch?"

"We should feign a stand in the forest. When the dragon attacks, we will split. Vaerana will take the Maces toward Moonstonn House. Minister Hsieh and the Shou will stay behind to act as a rear guard."

Hsieh locked gazes with Vaerana, then nodded. He turned to Yu Po, who had two waterskins filled with ylang oil hanging from his saddle. Although the new blossoms had yielded more, the minister had assured them this was more than sufficient to save Yanseldara. The rest had been burned at the Ginger Palace.

Hsieh took the first skin off his adjutant's saddle to pass it to Vaerana.

"That is not what I meant," Ruha said. Cypress was so

close now that she could see his legs and arms dangling beneath his body.

"Vaerana is the bait. The dragon will follow her, and we will take the oil to
the barracks."

Hsieh shook his head. "That is not—"

"The witch is right. Minister. Cypress knows who the desperate ones are. He'll
follow us." Vaerana turned to
Pierstar. "Do it."

"You hold one skin, Lady Ruha." Hsieh passed an oil sack to the witch, then hung
the other on his own saddle and nodded to Yu Po. "You hear plan. Prepare line at
edge of wood."

As the two adjutants passed the orders along, Vaerana led Ruha and Hsieh off the
road. "Once you hit town, you can see Temple Hill from practically anywhere.
Elversult
Hall is straight across the market square from there, and the Jailgates—that's
the city prison—is a block north of the hall." She looked at Hsieh. "And try not
to kill any of my Maces when they challenge you. They don't know what's going
on, and we don't care much for foreign armies running through our city streets."

"Not one man falls to Shou blade," Hsieh promised.

Vaerana accepted the reassurance with a grim smile.
"Then I'll see you in the barracks, Helm willing." She turned away and spurred

her horse after Pierstar and the rest of the Maces, who were just disappearing into the wood. "May your steel bite deep!"

Hsieh's Shou followed close behind the Maces, then stopped at the forest edge and dismounted. They quickly formed a long wall bristling with halberds and crossbows. Ruha and the minister slipped through the line and guided their mounts past the rein holders, taking up a sheltered position from which they could flee in any direction.

There was no time to grow nervous or contemplate the coming battle. The last few men were still settling in when a deep, steady throbbing began to pound the air. The dragon appeared an instant later, flying low and fast, then wheeled toward the hill. Ruha raised a hand

toward the sun. Before she could utter an incantation, Hsieh pushed her arm down.

"They are soldiers. It is their duty to die." He gestured at the skins hanging from their saddle horns. "We must not draw attention to ourselves. What we carry is too important."

As Cypress neared the trees, he suddenly turned and swooped along the edge of the wood. "Give me the oil!" he roared. "The oil and your gold!"

"Kozah save us!" Ruha gasped. "He speaks!"

The clacking of a hundred crossbows reverberated through the wood, and a wall of iron darts rose to answer the dragon's demands. Cypress roared and wheeled into the trees, and the battle did not begin so much as erupt. The forest shook with the crack of splintering treetops and steel blades glancing off bony scales and men screaming in fury and anguish. Ruha saw a huge, dark shape dancing across the broken oak trunks, his head swiveling this way and that as he bit attackers in two and searched for the precious ylang oil. Shou soldiers rushed him from all directions, flinging halberds and firing crossbows and hurling themselves against his flanks. Shattered scales and runnels of dark, smoking ichor began to fall from the dragon's body, and for one moment, the witch thought Hsieh's warriors might bring their foe down through sheer weight of numbers.

Somewhere up the hill, Pierstar Hallowhand cried, "Ride!"

The ground trembled with the distant thunder of pounding hooves. Cypress's slender head rose out of the melee and turned toward the sound. He tried to raise his wings so he could pursue the fleeing horsemen, but even he lacked the strength to fling off the hundred Shou hacking at his flanks. He opened his

mouth, and the leaves in the trees began to rustle.

Instinctively, Ruha's hand dropped toward her pocket. "He's going to breathe!"

Hsieh reached over and grasped the witch's arm. "We must let him."

The dragon swung his head in an arc around himself, spraying a boiling black vapor from his maw. The caustic fog billowed through the treetops and began to settle groundward, filling the wood with a tremendous sound of sizzling and popping. Out of the dark cloud fluttered a deluge of leaves and sticks, disintegrating as they fell.
Then came a cascade of heavy branches that crashed down upon the heads of the Shou and turned the forest floor into an impassible tangle of smoking, acid-drenched wood.

Hsieh's men cried out in fear and confusion, and their attack faltered. A low, bitter growl rumbled from Cypress's throat. He beat the air with his tattered wings, then rose above the carnage and, dripping runnels of acid from his dull scales, flew after the Maces.

Some of the Shou dove beneath the jumbled tree limbs to seek shelter, while

others clambered across the tangled branches in a desperate effort to escape the
black shroud descending upon their heads. Hsieh glanced toward the hilltop to be
certain that Cypress was gone, then released Ruha's arm so she could help his
men.

It was too late. The burning fumes had already reached the ground, and a hundred
Shou warriors were raising their voices in a single wail of agony. Mercifully,
the very darkness of the fog spared Ruha the sight of the dragon's acid eating
the flesh from their bones.

Fifteen

As Ruha and her companions galloped into the shadow of Temple Hill—a barren,
stone-flanked tor towering high above the city's close-packed heart—they met a
wall of jabbering, frightened townsmen. It was the first sign of dragon-spawned
fear they had encountered. Until now, the people of
Elversult had leapt into nearby doorways and hurled insults at the battered
foreigners charging up Snake
Road. This mob barely seemed to hear the clattering

hooves.

Ruha reined her mount to a walk, slowing the whole column. Counting Hsieh, there

were thirteen riders behind her. It seemed likely that more Shou had survived
the battle with Cypress, but neither the witch nor the mandarin had thought it
wise to spend time regrouping.
They had simply turned their horses toward the heart of the city and urged them
into a gallop, trusting that any warriors who could would follow.

The mob began to swirl around the column of riders.
Ruha saw no blood or horrible acid burns, and the crowd appeared more determined
than panicked. The witch stopped her horse and caught a swarthy man by the
shoulder of his embroidered merchant's robes. He cried out and whirled around,
glaring at the witch as though she had tried to rob him.

"Sir, please tell me what is happening."

"Haven't you heard? They say a dragon's coming!"

"Where?" Ruha asked. "Is he ahead?"

The merchant shrugged. "Don't know. No one's seen him, and the Maces don't mean
us to.. They've ordered everyone out of town."

"How much farther is…"

The man turned away and vanished into the crowd before Ruha could finish the
question. She urged her horse forward. The mob reluctantly

parted ahead of her,
alternately shouting warnings and curses. The witch ignored both and cast
thoughtful glances down the empty alleyways that occasionally separated one
wattle-anddaub tenement from the adjacent one. She was tempted to search for a
faster route to the Jailgates, but she had seen the back streets of enough
Heartlands cities to know most were confusing labyrinths of filth and dead ends.

Hsieh edged his horse alongside Ruha's, drawing several vehement curses from
the river of people coming in the opposite direction. The mandarin leaned over
and grabbed the rope holding the witch's skin ofylang oil, then deftly looped it
an extra time around her saddle horn.

"Someone follows us." He did not point or turn his head, but his eyes flickered
toward his far shoulder. "I
think they are not Vaerana's men."

Ruha turned as though speaking to the minister and glanced down the avenue. It
did not take long to discover their stalkers. There were at least five of them,
pressed close to the buildings and scurrying along against the crowd. They wore
plain cloaks that did a poor job of concealing the breastplates beneath, and
they carried swords and axes on their belts. Though they were not wearing the
black caps Ruha had seen in Pros, she felt sure they were

cult members; their faces all had the dark, gluttonous look of pillagers and murderers.

"Have you seen more on the other side of the street?"

"Many more."
Ruha looked forward again. "Cypress has called out his militia."

"Then he discovers trick. Soon he comes for us."

Ruha filled her lungs, and then spoke the incantation of the same wind spell she had used to attract the Ginger Lady's attention on the Dragonmere.

"Stand aside!" Ruha's horse reared at the thunder of her voice. She maintained a secure grip on the reins and spoke again, "Clear the road!"

The command blasted a dozen nearby people off their feet. Many more covered their ears and cast terrified glances skyward, confident that such a thunderous sound could only have come from the heavens. The largest part of the mob froze in their tracks and stared at each other with dumbstruck expressions.

"Stand aside, I say!"

A few people drifted toward the sides of the street, but most of crowd remained too stunned to move. Ruha glanced back and saw that the

cult members were draw
ing their weapons.

"Make threat." Hsieh, who was holding his hands over his own ears, shouted the
suggestion. "Fear moves what kind words cannot."

"Move, or I shall move you!" Ruha commanded. "You have to the count of three.
One…"

By the time she reached two, even the people who had been knocked to the ground
were scrambling out of the way. A brief clash of steel sounded behind her as the
cult stalkers rushed to attack. The witch dug her heels into her mount's flanks.
The trembling beast sprang forward, leaping four people who had not been quick
enough to gather themselves up.

Ruha continued to yell. The mob split before her, creating a narrow canyon
down the center of Snake Road.
Trusting her mount to pick its own path, she glanced back and was relieved to
see the tail of her horse slapping the nose of Hsieh's. The rest of the Shou
were close

behind, several holding blood-stained swords in their free hands. The witch
turned her attention forward again, doing her best to search the crowd ahead for
any sign of an attack.

Ruha rounded a gentle bend and saw more people pouring onto Snake Road from a large side street ahead.

In the intersection stood a small party of stern-faced Maces, blocking the narrow pathway created by the witch's booming threats. Their weapons were drawn, and behind them stood a blue-robed man with the impatient scowl of a sorcerer who had better things to do than deal with dragon panics and columns of careless horsemen.

Beyond the roadblock, the avenue continued only two hundred paces before it passed out of Temple Hill's shadow and opened into a vast, sunlit market plaza.

Ruha slowed her mount, bringing the column to a stop before the glowering Maces.

A grim-faced man with a ruddy complexion stepped forward and pointed his mace at the witch.

"See here, Stranger. Even in the best of times, we don't like __"

"Vaerana Hawklyn would be most appreciative if you will lead us to the Jailgates." Although Ruha whispered the words, the leader and his fellow Maces cringed at the strength of her voice. She urged her horse forward, leaning down to offer the man a hand up. "The Cult of the Dragon is close behind, and it won't be long before the dragon himself comes for us."

The leader arched an eyebrow and lowered his weapon, but made no move to climb up behind Ruha. "What's going on?"

"We lack time to explain matter, but it is of great urgency for safety of Lady Yanseldara," said Hsieh. "Now, please to get on horse or stand aside."

The leader jammed his mace into his belt and reached for the witch's hand. "This had better not be some kind of trick."

As Ruha clasped the man's steel glove, the crowd

began to churn and close. Someone clamped a hand over the old sorcerer's mouth; then a dagger tip erupted from his chest. Hand axes and short swords appeared from under cloaks and cleaved three Elversian skulls before the Maces realized they were being assaulted. The survivors turned to find themselves facing half-a-dozen attackers each.

"Ambush!"

The angry leader clamped his mailed fingers around Ruha's wrist and jerked, nearly pulling her from her mount.

Suddenly, he cried out in anguish and threw himself against the flanks of the witch's horse. She glimpsed the butt of a crossbow bolt sticking through the armor between his shoulders, then felt hands tugging at her

saddle straps.

"Get away from me!" she bellowed.

Her horse reared at her thunderous command, and the grasping hands fell away from her saddle. Hsieh came up beside her, at once trampling the Maces' fallen leader and burying his square-tipped sword in an axe-man's skull. Ruha urged her own mount forward, then led the column across the intersection, scattering ambushers and bystanders alike with the might of her booming voice.

They had barely crossed before a pair of gloomshrouded figures appeared at the end of the street, blocking the route into the sunlit market plaza. The man was tall and broad-shouldered. He wore steel plate as black as jet and carried not a sword, but a sliver of darkness shaped like a sword. It was impossible to say what the woman looked like; she was a mere silhouette, a night phantom obtruding on the light of day.

Ruha dropped her reins and raised one hand toward the sky. She pointed the other at the phantom-woman and shook the lane with the rumbling incantation of her sun spell. Five streaks of golden flame shot from her fingers and arced down the street, twining themselves

together into a crackling cord as thick as a man's leg.

The spell took less than three heartbeats to streak the length of the street,
and in that time Ruha's galloping horse had carried her halfway to the
marketplace. The fiery rope arced down to strike the shadow-sorceress. The
black-armored knight stepped in front of his mistress, raising the tip of his
dark sword as though he meant to split the fire.

Instead of dividing down the center, the blazing cord entered the dark blade and
drained from sight. A black flash shone through the window of a street-front
tenement; then the entire building erupted into golden flame
The conflagration engulfed a dozen bystanders and seared many more. The crowd
erupted into hysteria, some howling in anguish and others wailing in terror
Those near the buildings, fearing more such explosions, pushed toward the center
of the street, while those nearer the charging horses pressed toward the
buildings
The witch rode into a cloud of greasy smoke, and the hor rid stench of charred
flesh filled her nose. She found her self struggling to keep her gorge down,
sickened more by the knowledge that her magic had helped cause the awful smell
than by the odor itself.

The column had nearly reached the end of the street

Ruha felt a horse flank brush against her leg and looked over to see a Shou
warrior moving up beside her, sword drawn and eyes wild with battle lust. On her
other flank rode Hsieh himself. The mandarin's face was almost rapturous in
its placidity, his square-tipped blade held loosely in his hand.

The dark knight raised his black sword and rushed forward to meet Hsieh. At the
same time, the shadowy sorceress drew her hands up before her body, raising an
impenetrable curtain of darkness around the battleground.

There was no time to rein in. Praying they would emerge in the marketplace with
at least one sack of ylang oil intact, Ruha pulled herjambiya and galloped

into the darkness. From Hsieh's side came the crackle of breaking bones,
followed by the scream of a horse and the crash and clamor of armored and
unarmored bodies tumbling along the cobblestones. Ruha heard the mandarin give
a short angry yell; then a hand caught hold of her saddle, and she lost track
other companions.

The witch lashed down into the black murk, and her dagger sliced harmlessly
through air. The cinch strap around her horse's belly popped loudly; then her
saddle came loose. Ruha felt herself slipping down her mount's flank and grabbed

for the ylang oil. The cobblestones slammed into her shoulder, and her body went
rigid with pain. She bounced head over heels, feet still caught in her stirrups,
and came to a rest, her head spinning.

The darkness around her exploded with clapping hooves and confused voices, both
Shou and Elversian. A
pair of steel horseshoes grazed Ruha's leg; then a horse screamed and crashed to
the street. The witch found her saddle horn. She untied the oil sack and kicked
free of her stirrups. A sharp point tangled briefly in the thick cloth other
aba, then pushed through and bit deep into her side.

For a moment, Ruha was too confused to realize what had happened. Then she felt
a fiery sting and warm, wet blood spilling down her stomach. She screamed and
rolled away, lashing out with heTJambiya.

The blade dragged. Something hot and sticky poured over her hand, and a rich,
coppery smell filled her nostrils. The witch flipped her wrist and brought her
weapon back to inflict the famous T-shaped wound that made the curved daggers so
dangerous, but her foe had already vanished into the darkness.

Ruha pulled the ylang oil closer and clutched it to her breast. A clamorous
clash of steel rang out behind her as the Shou turned to meet their cult

pursuers. The witch weaved her dagger through the darkness in a blind defense
pattern, but a stinging anguish was spreading outward from her wound, and her
arm would not move

swiftly. The oil sack felt warm and sticky against her breast, but she knew by
its smell that the fluid was on1.;;
her own blood. Had any ylang oil spilled, she would surely have been nauseated
by its sick-sweet smell.

"Ruha?" Hsieh's voice sounded shaky and weak.

"Here, Minister." Ruha heard someone step to her side, then a small Shou hand
took her beneath her dagger arm. When it began to pull her up, she asked, "They
did not steal your oil sack, did they?"

The hand suddenly loosened its grasp, and Hsieh's voice hissed, "I thought you
had the oil."

Ruha did not hesitate; she swung her arm up backward and drove the tip of her
jambiya deep into the impostor's torso. The hand opened entirely and a haggi ,'i
scream filled the witch's ear. She scrambled to her fe "•
and stumbled away as fast as she could, clutching tt ylang oil to her breast and
slashing her dagger blind., through darkness. After a few steps, the witch
sniffed familiar scent. The odor was fresher and not quite -i

cloying as the
ylang oil she had smelled in Prince Tang's spice refinery, but there could be no
doubting it. She turned slightly off her course and followed the fragrance
toward its source.

A moment later, the witch stepped into the sunlight and found herself staring at
Hsieh's blood-spattered back. The mandarin reeked of ylang oil and still carri?
•"'
his burst sack over his shoulder, and in his hand he he the dark knight's black
sword. Ahead of him, the shan owy sorceress was groaning feebly and staggerü^
through the deserted market plaza toward a looming, black-winged shape.

After a hundred tries, Tang managed a flawless hurl
Flying sideways, the golden necklace hit Yanseldara's staff, and the heavy
amulet at the end whipped around and swung over its own chain. The choker slid
down the

shaft and stopped at the red-glowing pommel, which hung over Tang and his
mother's heads like a strange, uby-flamed chandelier. The prince carefully
pulled his rope taut, then walked around the ingot island to twine the line more
securely about the shaft.

"This no time to stretch legs, Brave Prince." Lady Feng positioned herself

directly beneath the staff. "Pull!"

Tang climbed to the center of the island and hauled on the rope. The staff
popped free and plummeted straight toward the head of the Third Virtuous
Concubine, who stepped aside and plucked it from the air without allowing the
topaz to strike the ingots. Before the prince could comment on her catch, she
slipped the rope off the shaft, then took a small bundle from her mahogany chest
and started down the slope.

Tang gathered up his rope and empty waterskin and followed. "The passage is long
one, Esteemed Mother. It would be better if you also had air."

"Cypress does not provide prisoners with sacks for air."
She opened her bundle and sat at the edge of the water.
"But not to worry. With you doing work, I do not need breath."

Lady Feng began to breathe quick and shallow, forcing her body to absorb as much
extra air as possible.

Tang sat at her feet and tied her ankles together.
"What of your spellbook?"

"Even small amount of water ruins it."

"Your chest is waterproof."

Lady Feng glowered at him. "You already pull too much. Spellbook is safe enough

here, with my other treasure." She snatched the rope from his hand, then untied the jewelry he had used to weight the end. She tossed the necklace on the ingot pile. "With all my treasure."

Tang sighed, resigning himself to a return trip after Lady Feng recovered her senses and wanted her spellbook. He snatched his rope back, finished binding his mother's ankles, and fastened the other end of the line to his waist. The prince filled his waterskin with air and

tied it around his neck, then helped the Third Virtuous Concubine seal her mouth with a gag of waxed silk. She picked up Yanseldara's staff, and soon they were in the water. Tang helped her out into the lake and swam over to where the treasure vault's ceiling sloped down to meet the water.

"Are you ready. Esteemed Mother?"

Lady Feng took a few more breaths through her nose, then nodded and mumbled something that might have been, "No dawdling."

She plugged her nostrils, and Tang dove beneath the surface, dragging the Third Virtuous Concubine behind him. The light from the glowing spirit gem in Yansel dara's staff illuminated the watery cavern in shimmering scarlet light, revealing a huge, winding passage that was not so much a single corridor as a

confluence of smaller tunnels arriving from all directions. Despite the
labyrinthine appearance, there was no doubt about which passage Cypress used;
even if the other tunnels had been large enough to hold him, his stony scales
had scoured hundreds of shallow furrows along the proper route.

Although Tang could not be certain, the trip out of the treasure chamber seemed
to go much faster than it had coming in. A slight current carried him forward
even when he did nothing, while the light from the spirit gem made it much
easier to find handholds. The prince drew himself yards at a pull, and he had
just drawn his second breath from the air skin when the first brown hints of bog
rot began to cloud the water. The rope grew slack as
Lady Feng drifted toward him.

Tang glanced back and saw his mother's pop-eyed stare locked on his kicking
heels. Her waxed gag and nostril plugs remained in place, but her cheeks were
puffedout and her face was crimson with the desire for breath
She scowled and waved him forward, then clamped her free hand over her mouth and
nose.

The prince looked ahead and pulled through the pas-

sage with renewed vigor. To his dismay, the water did not

grow any murkier.
The gentle current that had been pushing them forward died away. He started to worry that he had somehow lost his way, but that could not be.
They had passed no side tunnels large enough to hold Cypress, and the walls in this passage still showed the deep scouring marks left by the dragon's scales.

Tang began to sense a dark presence ahead. For a moment, he feared it was their foe swimming up the passage; then he saw a curtain of gray stone at the end of the tunnel: Cypress had blocked the exit. The prince did not waste any of his precious breath lamenting the dragon's foresight. He simply pulled himself to the boulder, then turned to take Yanseldara's staff from his mother so he could search for gaps around the edges.

Lady Feng's pop-eye was fluttering in its socket. Her cheeks were no longer puffed out and her face had turned more purple than crimson. Though she still held her free hand clamped over her mouth, a small stream of bubbles was rising from between her fingers. Tang knew she had pulled her gag aside to expel her breath and was struggling not to fill her lungs with water. Only one gulp of air remained in the air skin. The prince's own lungs were burning with the desire for another breath, but he pushed the sack toward his mother's mouth.

Lady Feng caught his arm. Her squinty eye rolled forward and looked Tang up
and down, and the Third Virtuous Concubine smiled. She shook her head and
pushed the air skin back toward the prince's mouth, then pointed from his lips
to hers.

Tang nodded and expelled his breath, then sucked the last of the air from the
skin. He held it in his lungs only a moment before placing his mouth over his
mother's and blowing a long gasp into her lungs. It was the third time the air
had been used, and he did not know how much good it would do her, but he hoped
that it would at least reduce the temptation to open her mouth.

Lady Feng accepted the gift, then pushed Yanseldara's

staff into his hand and pulled his dagger from his belt,
Tang scowled in confusion. Before he realized what she was doing, the Third
Virtuous Concubine grabbed his free arm and drew the blade across his empty
palm. As blood clouded around his fingers, she opened her mouth and spoke. Water
rushed into her lungs, and her body began to convulse instantly as it
instinctively tried to cough. Horrified at the sight of what he took to be his
mother's fast-approaching death, the prince reached out to draw her close.

Lady Feng pushed him away and pointed at the bloody cloud in the water beside them. To Tang's surprise, it was coalescing into the shape of a man's head.

Suddenly, the Third Virtuous Concubine threw her arms around the prince's neck. A series of powerful convulsions racked her chest; then her body went limp and her lips fell open. Tang clamped his hand over her mouth and tried not to think of the terrible burning in his own chest.

When the prince turned back to the crimson head, he was amazed to see the familiar grim face of General Fui D'hang floating in the water beside him.

Fui's head tipped forward, as though bowing, and floated toward a small side passage. Tang jammed Yanseldara's staff into his belt, then grabbed a handhold and pulled himself after the loyal general.

*!!!***

Cypress stood in the heart of the sunlit plaza, towering high above a sea of tent-roofed stalls. His empty eye sockets turned in the direction ofRuha and Hsieh. The dozens of lances and arrows hanging from his thick scales hinted at the fight Vaerana's Maces had put up before—before what? The witch had no way to guess whether the dragon had killed the Lady Constable and

all her men, or had
simply discovered the ruse and flown away.

Save for the groaning shadow-sorceress and the meat animals clucking and
snorting inside their cages, the market was silent and deserted, with bolts of
cloth strewn through the narrow lanes and dried legumes spilling onto the ground
from open sacks. Ox wagons and pushcarts sat abandoned upon the road that
circumscribed the plaza, and all the buildings that fronted it had their
windows shuttered and barred against the impending acid storm. On the far side
of the bazaar, almost directly behind the dragon, loomed a handsome building of
marble pillars and arched entranceways that could only be Elversult Hall.

The clang of steel against steel still rang from the darkness at Ruha's back,
but it seemed wiser to risk that battle than to venture into the open with the
dragon. The witch reached for Hsieh's shoulder, then groaned sharply as her
bleeding wound protested with lances of pain. She settled for the mandarin's arm
and pulled him into the blackness after her.

They took no more than two steps before Cypress's deep-voiced incantation
rumbled across the marketplace.
The sunlight burned the magical darkness into ash, which fell to the ground and

spread a grimy layer of soot over the many corpses—Shou, cult, and horse—piled atop the cobblestones. Five blood-covered Shou were bouncing between three and four attackers each, striking as often with a driving elbow or flying foot as with whirling blades. The street beyond was clear as far as the intersection, but beyond that it remained thickly choked with refugees.

The cobblestones trembled with the heavy thud of the dragon's step. Seemingly oblivious to his wounds, Hsieh leapt a mangled horse and charged toward his outnumbered men.

"Stay close. Lady Ruha!"

The witch clenched her teeth against the pain in her side and circled the dead beast, shuddering with fear each time she felt the ground tremble with Cypress's

heavy step. Hsieh reached the battle and swung his sword at the nearest cult member. The man raised a long-handled axe to parry. The minister's dark blade passed through both weapon and armor with no more effect than a shadow. The instant the black sliver touched the fellow's skin, however, it grew as solid as steel and cleaved him down the center.

After that, Hsieh wielded his weapon as though it were black lightning, felling one, then two, three, and four more enemies in as many eye

blinks. The remaining
Shou quickly seized the advantage and began to slay their attackers.

Ruha was beginning to have visions of turning the remarkable weapon against
Cypress when the last cult member fell. The witch stepped over a Shou corpse and
rushed to follow Hsieh toward the intersection; then she heard the dragon's
voice rumbling with another magic invocation. She scooped a handful of bloody
pebbles off the street and turned, hurling them at her foe and uttering her
briefest stone spell.

The rocks streaked straight into Cypress's empty eyes, striking with a loud,
sharp crackle. The dragon's head snapped back; then a spray of bone shards and
shattered scales erupted from the back of his skull. He roared, spraying a fine
black mist into the air, and then began to shake his head.

Ruha turned to follow Hsieh. She was not disappointed; it would take a hundred
such attacks to destroy
Cypress, but at least she had interrupted the dragon's spell —or so she thought,
until a corpse's lukewarm hand caught her by the ankle.

Ruha twisted to avoid landing on the ylang oil and came down on her wounded
side. The impact drove spikes of pain deep into her body. The witch found
herself struggling for breath, and she knew she was

dangerously close to
blacking out. The corpse grabbed hold with its second hand and dragged itself
forward. She looked down and saw that her attacker was the dead Shou over which

she had stepped earlier. She tried to kick free, but it felt no pain from her
blows and would not let go.

Hsieh appeared at Ruha's side and brought his sword down across the corpse's
shoulders. The dark blade passed over the zombie's body like a shadow, causing
no harm at all. The mandarin's narrow eyes grew as round as saucers; then the
arms of a dead cultist grabbed him from behind and hurled him to the ground.

The cobblestones shuddered as Cypress resumed walking. Ruha craned her neck
and saw that she and Hsieh were not the only ones in dire circumstances. The
dragon had animated all the corpses in the street. Though the zombies were slow
and clumsy, they were pressing the
Shou survivors by virtue of their numbers alone.

Ruha's attacker grabbed hold other belt, then slammed its free fist into the pit
other stomach. She tried to scream in pain, but the blow had driven her breath
away, and she could do no more than grunt. The zombie raised its fist to strike
again. She released the oil sack and deflected the punch with her forearm. In

the same motion, the witch drove the heel other free hand into the side of her
attacker's head and heard the temple snap.
^Pushing with all the strength in her legs, she rolled onto
"-her side and threw the dead Shou off.

•^Ruha grabbed the oil sack and leapt up. As she turned to flee, the dragon's
huge shadow fell over her body. She sprinted for the intersection. The pain in
her side was excruciating, but she managed to ignore it and rush forward at a
pace that would have made a hare-hound proud. She kept expecting Cypress to say
something, to iwcommand her to stop or at least to taunt her, but he held his
tongue. Ruha found the silence even more alarming than the hiss of his lungs
filling to spray acid. The dragon was thinking of only one thing: killing her.
To comment on his intentions would have been a meaningless waste of breath.

The street trembled again, and Ruha knew she had no hope of outrunning her
pursuer. She summoned a wind

spell to mind and darted toward the street side, then heard the whoosh of the
dragon's huge talons slicing through the air behind her. The witch forced
herself not to look toward her pursuer's face; the last time she met his gaze,
he had nearly taken over her mind.

Ruha angled toward the entrance to the nearest tenement.

In the corner other eye, she glimpsed Cypress's other huge claw sweeping down to pluck her up. She slammed her feet against the street and managed to slow herself, allowing the black hand to sweep past without catching her. Then, feeling like a spiny iguana dodging a hungry Bedine boy, she darted forward again.

The tenement was barely three paces away. Ruha took a deep breath, then uttered her wind spell and exhaled.
A ferocious gust of air howled from her lips, blasting the heavy oaken door into splinters. The witch rushed blindly into the building's deep-shadowed interior.
Three paces inside, she stumbled over a step and slammed face first into a wooden staircase.

Ruha gathered herself together and spun around, then barely leapt aside in time to prevent Hsieh's dark sword from piercing her heart. The mandarin stumbled over the same stair as the witch, but managed to recover more gracefully by picking up his feet and landing two steps up the stairwell. Behind him came two of his men, who also displayed their incredible agility by managing to catch each other when they also tripped over the step.
The witch did not know how any of them had escaped the zombies—in a manner similar to how she had, she supposed—but she was glad for the company.

"Where now?" Hsieh squinted at Ruha with his uncovered eye.

"I do not know."

Ruha stepped around the stairwell and ran down a broad, dirty corridor toward
the back of the building. As
Hsieh and his men moved to follow. Cypress's hand burst through the doorway and
caught the last one in line. The warrior howled in pain, and Hsieh raised his
sword to

charge the doorway.

Ruha caught him by the shoulder. "If that blade did not affect the corpses, it
will not harm Cypress. He is also undead."

"Thank you. I would feel most foolish." The mandarin gestured down the corridor.
"Please to make most of soldier's sacrifice."

Ruha turned down the hall and tried a dozen barred doors before the captured man
finally stopped screaming.

There was a brief silence; then the warrior behind
Hsieh said, "Dead men follow us."

"Cypress fears to destroy oil sack," Hsieh observed.
"Otherwise, he sprays us with acid."

"True, but I doubt he is willing to let us escape." Ruha started down the

corridor again, judging they had less than forty paces before it ended in a
windowless stone wall. "And we will soon run out of room. I fear the back of
this building stands against Temple Hill."

Hsieh caught Ruha by the shoulder. "You stop dead men. We find way out."

Ruha glanced down the corridor at the long line of zombies. The closest was only
ten paces away, but was slow and shambling. She nodded. As Hsieh's warrior began
hacking at a door, the witch picked up a small stone lying among the refuse
against the wall. She used it to scrape a line up both walls to within a few
inches of the ceiling. She connected them with another line on the floor, then
laid the rock upon it. The leading corpse was only two steps away.

A muffled clamor sounded somewhere in the structure far above, presumably
Cypress tearing the roof away. As much as Ruha wanted to glance at the ceiling,
there was no time. She spoke the incantation other stone spell. The rock on the
floor disappeared, then a shimmering gray wall formed between the three lines
the witch had traced on the floor. The first corpse, a dark-haired cult member
with an ugly skull wound, arrived at the barrier. He managed to push his head
and one arm through before the magic wall

turned as solid as granite. The zombie remained there, reaching for the
witch's oil sack and moaning in the plaintive, incoherent voice of a tormented
spirit.

Another crash reverberated down from above, this time followed by the clatter of
falling rubble.

"He is digging his way down through the building!"
Ruha cried, spinning toward Hsieh.

She completed the turn in time to see an iron bolt shoot through the breach
Hsieh's man had hacked in the door. The dart buried its head in the opposite
wall, and the muffled clatter of a bow crank sounded from inside the chamber.
The warrior reached through the hole and lifted the crossbar off its supports.

"Get on with you!" cried the man on the other side of the door. His voice
sounded both fearful and old. "The next one won't miss!"

Hsieh's soldier shoved the door open and stormed inside, yelling, 'You dare to
attack Shou mandarin!"

A heavy thud shook the building; then the ceiling began to crack and groan
beneath a great weight. Ruha and Hsieh followed the warrior into a small,
windowless shop filled with the cluttered shelves of an apothecary.

The soldier was leaning over a chest-high counter, holding his sword to the
throat of a mousy, squint-eyed man.
On the counter lay an empty crossbow and a crucible heating over the flame of an
alcohol lamp.

As soon as she saw the lamp's blue flame, Ruha's heart skipped a beat. If she
could use such a hot fire to cast her most powerful sun spell, even Cypress
would be helpless to defend himself. She stepped toward the apothecary, but
Hsieh spoke before she could ask the old man if he had any brimstone.

"Where is Number Two Exit?" Hsieh demanded, his gaze darting from one cramped
corner to the next.

"Isn't one."

"What is this material?" Hsieh stepped to the outside wall and ran his fingers
over the smooth, white-washed surface.

"Wattle and daub," the apothecary answered.

When the mandarin did not seem to understand, Ruha said, "A sort of mud
plaster."

The planks above their heads creaked, then began to pop and crack. The
chandelier above the apothecary's counter started to swing,

and Ruha looked up
to see the exposed joist logs bowing directly over their heads. The dragon knew
exactly where they were, and it took the witch only an instant to guess how. If
the smell ofylang oil had led her to Hsieh earlier, then certainly the dragon,
with his much larger nose, could track them by the same scent.

A tremendous splintering filled the room as five huge talons pierced the
ceiling. The apothecary wailed and dropped to his knees behind the counter, and
Hsieh shoved his warrior toward the outside wall.

"Kick hole."

The claws began to rip through planks of thick wood as if they were made of
paper. Hsieh's soldier sheathed his sword and stepped back to get a running
start, and Ruha leaned over the counter to look at the cowering apothecary.

"Have you brimstone?" When the man only looked at her with terrified eyes, she
yelled, "Brimstone powder—now!"

The dragon's fist closed around a joist log and started to tug. The beam, a
rough-hewn pine trunk as thick as an ogre's leg, groaned and bowed, but it would
not break—at least not easily. Hsieh's man charged across the room, then picked
up both feet and attacked with a flying, twolegged stomp

kick. The daub
cracked beneath his heels, and he crashed through the wall to disappear outside.

The apothecary shoved an open bottle of yellow powder onto the counter and
ducked out of sight again. Ruha grabbed the lamp from beneath the crucible and
pulled the wick stopper. The cloth was still saturated with alcohol, so the
flame continued to burn as she poured the fuel into the brimstone bottle.

A deep, rumbling grunt shook the shop. The joist log snapped with a mighty
crack, and the ceiling sagged beneath Cypress's weight. The dragon tore a
handful of wood away, creating a hole twice the size of a door.

Hsieh stepped to Ruha's side. "You must come now!"

"In a moment." Holding the saturated brimstone in one hand and the flickering
lamp wick in the other, Ruha turned to face Cypress. "First I must stop the
dragon."

"That will not be so easy as you think!" Cypress's voice boomed through the
empty hole as loud as thunder. J
have learned to be wary of you.

The dragon's second sentence tolled through Ruha's head like a striking bell,

shattering her concentration
She tried to summon the incantation of her most powerful sun spell, but could
not.

Did you think I had to see your eyes to attack your mind? The words echoed back
and forth through Ruha's head, building on each other, growing louder and
sharper with every reverberation. Any contact will do.

Ruha tried to bring the flickering wick to the brimstone bottle, but her body
did not seem to hear her wishes. Her hands remained a foot apart, shaking with
the memory of what she had intended, yet unable to obey.
The wick in her hand sputtered and smoked darkly as it ran out of alcohol and
began to consume itself instead.

"Why do you wait?" Hsieh demanded. "Cast spell!"

The sound of cracking wood filled the chamber once again, and the ceiling sagged
almost to their heads as the dragon lay on the floor above. When Ruha did not
move,
Hsieh apparently realized what was wrong. He pulled a lasal leaf from his pocket
and slipped it between her lips.
The witch allowed it to fall from her mouth; if they were to have any chance of
escaping the dragon, she could not allow a lasal haze to cloud her mind.

Hsieh watched the leaf flutter to the floor, then pulled his

dagger from its
sheath.

"So sorry, Lady Witch." He cut the rope hanging over her shoulder and took the
sack of oil. "Must not let

dragon have ylang oil."

The dragon's withered hand came through the hole and snaked toward the witch.
The mandarin quickly stepped away, then turned and threw himself through the
opening in the wall.

Cypress's talons stopped a foot short of Ruha, and the din assailing her head
quieted to a dull roar. The lamp wick hissed and flickered and began to shrink.
The witch considered trying to resist the dragon's mind attack, but he was too
powerful to defeat. Instead, she let all her defenses down, envisioning her mind
as the great hall of an empty Heartlands castle, where even the slightest sound
reverberated like a drum.

What is happening to you? Cypress demanded. Where is the oil?

Ruha made no reply, allowing the dragon's words to crash through her mind with
such force they shattered the walls of the hall she had envisioned.

The ruse worked. Cypress's hand suddenly pulled away, and

the cacophony in
Ruha's mind quieted as he sniffed out the ylang oil. Her hand obeyed when she
tried to move it; even the dragon could not focus his attention in two different
places at once. She pushed the bottom of the wick into the mixture of brimstone
and alcohol. The flame quickly returned to its steady blue gleam, but the witch
forced herself not to think about her sun spell. The dragon was still inside her
head, and he would feel the effort of summoning the incantation from her memory.

Ruha had to wait only an instant before Cypress's head shot through the hole,
his nostrils flaring as he tried to sniff out the fading scent of Hsieh's
oil-soaked body. The witch hurled her bottle at an eye socket. The dragon
flinched away, and the glass shattered against the side of his head. The burning
wick instantly touched off the mixture of alcohol and sulfur, filling the
chamber with a searing blue-yellow flash.

Cypress bellowed in shock and pulled his burning face out of the chamber. Ruha
stepped over to the hole,

summoning her incantation as she went. She saw the dragon's head more than two
stories above, shaking madly from side to side, trailing long tails of sapphire
and amber flame. The witch thrust her hand toward the fire and spoke her

incantation.

The blaze erupted into a blistering orb of white-hot flame, as brilliant as the sun in the sky and twice as large. The dragon wailed in anguish. When he raised his claws to his face, they caught fire and started to burn with a flickering yellow flame. He started to dance about, and Ruha heard a tremendous crash in the next room as one of his heavy feet came through the ceiling. Burning scales began to flutter off his head and touch off fires on the floors above. Cypress raised his wings, then roared in fury and launched himself into the air.

The witch turned away from the conflagration and saw the astonished apothecary standing behind his counter, his rheumy eyes fixed on the fiery hole over his head. She pulled him from behind the counter.

"Come along. We had better leave this place," she said dragging the old man toward the hole in the wall. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to guide me to the Jailgates?"

Sixteen

Deep in the Jailgates' thick foundations, Ruha caught herself staring at Yanseldara's cataleptic face. The Lady Lord lay in an infirmary bed, a honeyhaired beauty with the slender face and

sharply delicate features of a half-
^ elf. Save for the amethyst circles
/beneath her eyes, her skin was as pale as pearl. Her cheeks were hollow from
the lack of eating, her lips as gray as ash, her brow lined by the strain of a
wicked and endless nightmare. She could easily lack the strength to carry a
message to Lady Feng, even ifVaerana would agree to try Hsieh's potion.

Ruha turned to the Lady Constable who, despite having been knocked through a
mud-brick wall by Cypress's tail, sat in a chair next to Yanseldara's bed. A
priest had already examined and straightened the swollen purple mass that had
once been Vaerana's knee, but Minister
Hsieh had volunteered to sew up her many deep cuts. He was sitting beside her
now, smiling contentedly each time he pushed the needle into a long gash along
her jawline.

Ruha said, "Vaerana, I am sorry to interrupt while you are being attended to,
but we have something to discuss."

"Please to wait until I finish here," said Hsieh. "Or scar will be most
unflattering."

The mandarin's voice was hoarse and raspy, no doubt from

breathing the dusky
smoke that pervaded even the

fortress's underground chambers. Elversult was burning—a good part of it at
least—and there was no escaping the acrid murk. The fumes hung over the city
as heavy as a fog, creeping past shuttered windows and seeping under barred
doors to fill every room in every building with a choking gray cloud.

Perhaps that was a blessing, given the battle stench upon which Ruha would
surely have been gagging if her nose had not been so clogged by bitter soot.
With wounded
Maces sprawled on the floor as thick as rats or holding each other upright on
wooden benches, the chamber looked less like an infirmary than a crowded tavern
after a vicious and bloody brawl. Through the smoke haze, the witch saw bandaged
stumps where there should have been limbs, melted flesh bubbling up between the
links of scorched chainmail, and a hundred more wounds too terrible to look
upon for long. Many of the warriors had suffered their injuries when they rode
with Vaerana to lure
Cypress away from Ruha and Hsieh, but many more had been hurt in cult ambushes.
Even now, with Elversult's loyal citizens struggling to fight the fires Cypress
had set in his flaming panic, more than a dozen patrols of Maces continued to

battle the marauding bands.

Given the mild severity other own wound, Ruha would have felt guilty for the
healer's attention she had received the moment she walked in the door—save that
her battle was far from over. Her sun spell had driven Cypress into one of the
city's many lakes, but it had not destroyed him. Until the dragon was finally,
utterly annihilated, the witch knew better than to think either she or Yansel
dara would ever be safe.

Minister Hsieh looped his needle through the last stitch on Vaerana's jaw, then
cut the suture. "You may speak now." He stood and began to cut the hair away
from a long slash in her scalp. "But I advise you not to move head."

Vaerana scowled at the cascade of blood-matted tresses tumbling past her
shoulder. "Are you going to cut

it all off?" she growled. Then, to Ruha, "Well?"

Ruha glanced toward Yanseldara's slumbering form, then reached into her aba and
removed the potion Hsieh had given her earlier. "If we are to finish this
battle, we must contact Lady Feng."

Vaerana shook her head, then hissed sharply as
Hsieh's needle dragged across her wound. "You can see for yourself she's in no

condition to be carrying messages." She gestured at the bed beside her.
"Besides, we've got Cypress well in hand, thanks to you—though I
wish you hadn't helped him burn down a quarter of Elversult."

"One does not destroy great evil without great sacrifice," Hsieh remarked.

"We have not destroyed anything," Ruha corrected.
"Surrounding Cypress while he hides in Hillshadow Lake is not having him 'in
hand.' It is offering up Pierstar Hallowhand and his men to appease the
dragon's rage."

Vaerana frowned at the witch. "Didn't you listen to the last report. Witch?
Cypress lost his wings, along with his hands—and underneath that baby sun you
made, who knows what's happening to his head? Pierstar has ballistae and
wizards waiting on every shore. As soon as the dragon shows himself above water,
they'll blast him to pieces." She glowered at the witch, then added, "And they
won't burn down the city."

"It would not matter if they did," Ruha replied. "You gain nothing if Pierstar
destroys the dragon's body.
Cypress will simply take another; then we will not know where he is until he
returns as he did before. To truly defeat our enemy, we must allow Minister

Hsieh to contact Lady Feng and ask her to smash the dracolich's spirit gem."

Vaerana set her jaw. "Yanseldara's too weak. I'm not going to risk her life. And
even if we only destroy
Cypress's body, at least we're buying time to find his lair."

"But what of Lady Feng? Perhaps she has no time."
Hsieh stopped sewing and glanced at the bed next to

them. "Perhaps Lady Yanseldara has even less. If Lady
Feng uses oil from evening-picked blossoms, love potion does not last long. When
it wears off, her spirit must do battle with the dragon's."

Vaerana craned her neck to look up at Minister Hsieh, then swore as the movement
jerked the needle from his hands. "Don't you give me any Shou double-talk!
You're only trying to worry me."

"Vaerana, what he says sounds very true. Why are you being so stubborn?"

No sooner had the witch asked the question than she realized the answer. The
Lady Constable felt responsible for Yanseldara's condition—she had told Ruha as
muc .
shortly after their first meeting. On some level, at least,
Vaerana wanted to redeem herself by becoming the Lady Lord's rescuer.

Vaerana glowered at both Hsieh and Ruha for a moment,

then folded her arms
across her chest. "I'm not being stubborn." She leaned back to let Hsieh finish
stitching her scalp shut. "I'm being careful."

"Yes, it is good to be careful." Ruha nodded thoughtfully, then stepped over
to Yanseldara's bed. "She does look very weak, does she not. Minister?"

"It does not matter. Danger is from choking on potion
Even weak bond can carry message between body and spirit."

"But Yanseldara needs extra strength to battle
Cypress, does she not?" Ruha allowed her eyes to pivot toward Vaerana, then
raised the potion in her hand. "Or did I misunderstand you when you gave me
this?"

If Hsieh perceived Ruha's intentions, his face showed no sign of it. He frowned
slightly, then said, "I think you do misunderstand, Lady Ruha. I say not to
worry about
Cypress, because we give Lady Yanseldara strength."

Ruha breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Yes, that is right
I had forgotten."

"What are you two talking about?" Though Hsieh had stopped sewing, Vaerana
remained surprisingly still. "Is

there some way to make this safe?"

"More safe," Hsieh said. "But small risk always remains."

Ruha saw the interest fading from Vaerana's eyes.

"The greatest risk, of course, would be to you," Ruha added quickly "If Cypress
caught on—"

"I don't care about the risk to me!" Vaerana twisted around to look at Hsieh,
who deftly released the needle to keep from tearing her wound. "What will it
mean to
Yanseldara?"

"She draws strength from your spirit," Hsieh said, expounding on Ruha's
fabrication. "Much better for her."

"If there is trouble, you are certain to perish," Ruha added, trying to make the
ruse look as dangerous as possible. "Will you take the chance?"

Vaerana did not even hesitate. "Of course!"

Ruha handed the message potion to Hsieh. "If you will see to matters here, I
must leave immediately."

"Leave?" Vaerana asked. "Where are you going?"

"To Hillshadow Lake, of course," Ruha answered.
"When Lady Feng smashes Cypress's spirit gem, I suspect Pierstar will have

need of my magic."

Hsieh produced the last of the lasal from his pocket. "Perhaps you need these." He gave Ruha several of the slender leaves, but saved three for Vaerana. "Now, Lady Constable, please to chew and prepare yourself."

The water tickled Tang's toes, and he knew it was rising. The prince lay beside his resting mother, his bare feet dangling over the edge of a sloping limestone ledge. The ceiling hung so low above his back that he could not rise to his knees, and the wall ahead stood so close to his face that each stale breath curled back into his eyes. Yanseldara's staff lay at his side, and the ghostly head of General Fui hovered an arm's length away. The only sound that broke the cramped silence was the erratic gasping of

the Third Virtuous Concubine.

After pumping the fluid from Lady Feng's lungs, Tang had collapsed beside her and listened to the drops trickling off his feet into the dark pool from which they had come. The steady splashing had ceased not long ago, and now he felt a cool tide creeping up his toes. The water was definitely rising, no doubt because Cypress had blocked the cavern's only outflow.

Tang rolled onto his back, then picked up Yanseldara's staff

and held the
glowing pommel over the pool. An alligator could hardly have squeezed between
the surface of the black waters and ceiling. While lying on his back, it was
difficult for the prince to see into all the shadowy corners of the cramped
vault, but he discerned no hint of an exit above water.

As though to confirm what Tang already feared, Ge:i eral Fui drifted to the
middle of the dark pool, then se*
tied beneath the water and stopped to wait.

Lady Feng stirred and rolled onto her back. "What is happening, Brave Prince?"

"The water rises. We must go."

Lady Feng grimaced and shook her head. "We lose our way."

Tang lowered Yanseldara's staff toward the ghostly head waiting in the dark
pool. "General Fui guides—"

"Lady Feng?" The staff's glowing spirit gem dimmed slightly as a dulcet voice
filled the cramped vault. "Do you hear me?"

The words were Shou, but Tang, who had met Elversuit's Lady Lord on several
ceremonial occasions, recognized the voice as Yanseldara's. "Who is this?" he
demanded. "You are not Lady Lord!"

"Nor are you, but I hear you in Lady Yanseldara's voice. Are

you Third Virtuous
Concubine?"

Tang looked to his mother, who appeared only slightly less puzzled than he. She
shook her head to indicate she did not wish to speak, then motioned for him to
continue

"This is Prince Kao Chou Tang."

"I am most pleased to hear your voice, Young Prince." came the reply. "When I
give you leave to fetch Third Virtuous Concubine, I do not expect you to be
gone so long."

"Minister Hsieh!" Only the cramped quarters kept
Tang from kowtowing to the spirit gem. "Please to—"

"We discuss your disobedience soon enough," the mandarin replied. "I presume
you find Yanseldara's staff, or we could not speak. Do you also find Sagacious
Mother?"

Before Tang answered, a terrible thought occurred to him. "Esteemed Minister,
Cypress shares gem with
Yanseldara. Perhaps he hears us!"

There was a short silence; then Hsieh said, "It does not matter. Witch has
almost destroyed him."

This drew a smile from Lady Feng, who said, "I am here."

"Good. I bear greetings and message from Most High Emperor, but first—"

A sudden burst of darkness flared inside the spirit gem. "Tang! You are alive!"
rumbled Cypress's deep voice.
"Well, no matter. I am not so hurt as those fools imagine."

Tang was so startled that he let the staff slip from his hands, then barely
caught it before it rolled down the sloping shelf into the dark water. Once
again, the great topaz in the pommel glowed with the steady, brilliant scarlet
light that it had assumed when the two spirits inside it united—though the
prince fancied that he could now see glimmers of silver and black whirling deep
within the gem.

"Minister Hsieh?"

Tang's only answer was a faint purl as the dark waters seeped onto the ledge
where he and his mother lay.

*S|i***

Cypress lay at the bottom ofHillshadow Lake. Save for the golden ball still
burning at the end of his sinuous neck, he was a huge black shape barely visible
through the curtains of steam rising off the green waters. He

hardly moved, and he made no sound; if not for his black tail occasionally
rising to the surface, Ruha would not have known whether he still abided in his
dark body.

"How long will your fire keep burning, Lady Ruha?"
Pierstar gestured vaguely toward the halo of yellow, boiling waters in the
center of the lake. "We've been waiting for it to die out since he went under!"

"The spell draws its fire from the sun." The witch could hardly bear to take her
eyes off Cypress. It would not be long before Lady Feng smashed his spirit gem,
and then
Ruha would truly earn the right to be called a Harper.
"The magic will fade when the sun sets—or when I cancel the spell."

"Then you may call it off when you wish," Pierstar said. "We are ready to fight
when you are."

Along with a small company of officers and runners,
Ruha and the commander were standing behind the parapets of Baldagar Manor. The
villa was the lowest of four keeplike mansions grouped together on the western
shore of Hillshadow Lake. It offered the best view of the dragon, and it was
also well placed to serve as a command post.

The lake itself lay at the foot of Temple Hill, with beachfront streets

encircling one end and magnificent villas the other. Fully fifteen hundred Maces stood along the shores, either arrayed along the cobblestone roads or crowded together atop the roofs of the great mansions. In lieu of their customary maces and horse lances, the men were armed with harpoon-firing ballistae or net-flinging catapults. Should they be fortunate enough to actually bring Cypress down, groups of horse-mounted battle wizards waited in strategic locations to reinforce them.

Ruha nodded. "Your preparations are beyond reproach, Pierstar, but—how can I put this without seeming rude?"

"Rude?" the commander snorted. "Why would you worry about being rude when you've met Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Ruha smiled. "Then I will speak bluntly. While it is

clear that even the dragon cannot slay all of the men gathered here, I fear you may not stop him from escaping. Cypress is no fool. When he leaves the lake, he will not do the predictable thing."

"Of course not. But how can we predict the unpredictable?" Pierstar asked. "We are not gods."

"No, but we can control some things," Ruha replied. "By using those to our advantage, we can guide our foe's actions."

Pierstar raised a bushy eyebrow. "What are you thinking?"

The witch described her plan, and by the time she finished, Pierstar looked
both hopeful and concerned.

"You're taking a big risk on Elversult's behalf, Lady
Witch," he said. "Are you sure you want to?"

Ruha nodded. "I am sure. After Lady Feng smashes
Cypress's spirit gem, we will have only one chance to destroy him—and the best
way to be certain we do is to use his rage against him."

"Then Elversult thanks you, and so do I." Pierstar laid a hand on her shoulder.
"I'll give the orders."

Before the commander could leave, a breathless messenger stormed out of the
stairwell. He raised a hand in salute to Pierstar, then rushed over to Ruha.
"Minister
Hsieh sends word that he has spoken to Lady Feng—and her son, Prince Tang."

"And?" Pierstar asked.

"He reports that they have Yanseldara's staff, but
Cypress interfered before he could tell them to crush the gem."

Ruha's stomach turned queasy and cold, and she grew acutely aware of the dull
ache of the wound she had suffered earlier. She did not

realize she was
swaying, however, until Pierstar reached out to brace her.

"Lady Witch?"

"We're only fighting for time." Ruha's voice was so low that even she could
barely hear it. "Unless the gem is smashed, we cannot win."

"The Shou are a smart people." Pierstar's confidence sounded forced. "They will
understand what their mandarin wanted."

Ruha took a deep breath, then nodded. "Yes, that is what we must hope. We have
no other choice." Gently, she freed herself from Pierstar's supporting hand.
"Perhaps you should issue your orders. There is no telling what Cypress will
do now."

The commander nodded and went to speak with his officers.

When the messenger did not leave, Ruha asked, "Is there more?"

"The minister is reluctant to mix the ylang potion," the messenger reported. "He
said the spirit battle between
Cypress and Yanseldara has begun. Unless Prince Tang destroys the gem, it will
only distract the Lady Lord and make her weaker."

Ruha thought for a moment, remembering the fury in

Tang's eyes when he vowed to prove himself a man and stormed out of the spicehouse. She had expected his words to come to nothing, of course, but if he had actually reached Lady Feng, perhaps his promise had not been an empty one.

"Tell Hsieh to give her the potion."

"Then you think the prince will smash the gem?" The messenger's voice was hopeful.

Ruha spread her hands. "Not the prince I know—but the prince I know would not have had the courage to go into a dragon's lair after his mother. We can only hope this new prince is someone more worthy of the title."

"I'll tell the minister what you said. Is there anything else?"

Ruha shook her head, and the messenger departed.
Pierstar returned a short time later.

"Our wizards are on the way," the commander reported.
"I've also taken the liberty of taking a few other preparations."

Pierstar gestured at the mansions flanking Baldagar

Manor, where several ballista crews were sighting their weapons through the open shutters of the highest windows. On the roofs of the two buildings, the catapult crews were also moving their war engines into the

corners closest to
the command post. Although the men kept the weapons directed toward the lake,
they were careful to leave room to swing around at the last moment.

"You have thought of everything, Pierstar," Ruha commented. "And now, there is
no reason for you and your
men—"

"We're staying." Pierstar picked up a long, steelshanked pike and stepped to
the parapets. "If you look like bait, this plan won't work."

Tang filled the waterskin with air, then pushed the stopper into place and
looked over at his mother. She had sealed her nostrils with wax and was
breathing shallow and fast in preparation for their dive. The water was creeping
up the ledge; already, the prince could feel its coolness lapping at his hips.
He pulled his dagger and slipped the tip between the spirit gem and its
mounting.

"Tang, what do you do?" gasped Lady Feng.

"Minister Hsieh says Lady Ruha almost destroys
Cypress." The prince began to work his dagger back and forth. "He contacts us to
smash spirit gem."

Lady Feng laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Wait until we escape cave."

"Perhaps we do not escape cave." Tang continued to pry at the glowing topaz.
"Perhaps we drown first."

"Stop! I command you!"

Tang obeyed, surprised by his mother's frightened tone. "What is wrong, Lady
Feng? You always say life and death are same!"

"They are, but it is great insult for humble scholar to usurp authority of Great
Judge by throwing life away."
She did not take her hand from his arm. "And if you

destroy gem, how do we find way out?"

The prince waved the butt of the staff toward the dark pool, where the glowing
figure of General Fui's head waited to guide them to safety. "General Fui leads
us."

"General Fui is no longer bound to you by duty. Brave
Prince. I call him earlier because I sense change in you that, perhaps, earns
his respect. But it is difficult for him to be with us. Even most faithful of
servants cannot staylong, and in past you have done little to win his
loyalty."

Tang let his head drop onto the hard stones and stared at the gray ceiling

hanging like a tomb's lid above his face. He heard again the wet crack as the general was beheaded by his own son. That Fui had answered Lady Feng"s summons at all was a wonder, and that he continued to wait in the dark pool was an even greater marvel.

"Fui D'hang was most loyal soldier. Not to follow him now is great insult." Tang raised his head, then gave his mother a crooked smile. "Besides, we must smash spirit gem. If we die in cavern, it is only way to protect treasure from Cypress."

Lady Feng's pop eye looked as though it might fall from its socket; then she released her son's arm. "I get rock."

The prince twisted his dagger, then caught the glowing topaz as it popped free of its mounting. He placed it on the ledge beside him and took the large rock his mother thrust into his palm. Tang lifted the heavy stone to the ceiling, a breath's length above his face, and positioned it over the gem.

"Wicked dragon, when you present yourself before the Ten Courts of Yen-Wang-Yeh, know that Prince Tang sends you there—and may the Great Judge sentence you to an eternity in all Eighteen Hells!"

Tang brought his hand down. He felt the topaz shatter

beneath the stone, then
heard his mother cry out as a powerful concussion hurled them both against the
chamber walls. There was an ear-splitting wail and a deafening roar; then
two flashing lights whirled through the

room, one as silver as the moon and the other as black as obsidian. The
prince's head felt as though it would split, and he found himself struggling for
breath against a tremendous weight. He closed his eyes and beseeched his
ancestors to make ready for him in the Celestial
Bureaucracy.

The prayer went unanswered. Almost as soon as they had begun, the wailing and
the roaring died. The flashing lights vanished, and the terrible weight was
lifted from Tang's chest. He found himself lying on his back, gasping for breath
and staring at the low ceiling, still lit by the crimson glow of General Fui's
spirit.

"Tang?"

The prince turned his head and saw his mother lying beside him. She looked even
paler and older than usual.
"Yes, Lady Feng?"

"Now may we go?"

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Together, Ruha and Pierstar looked out over Hillshadow Lake's steaming waters,
waiting for the dark figure at the bottom to rise and attack. The war wizards
had begun to arrive and take their positions, both on
Baldagar Manor and the adjacent mansions. The witch was rubbing a round,
fist-sized stone between her palms, wondering if she had misjudged Tang and
desperately hoping she had not. She could lure Cypress from the water at any
time, but the ensuing battle would mean nothing if the prince had not smashed
the spirit gem.

The stone grew warm in Ruha's hands. She continued to rub her hands over it,
more to calm her nerves than to increase the effectiveness of her magic. She
would have time to hurl only one spell at Cypress, but she did not want it to be
so powerful it drove him away. Her job was to draw the dragon onto the roof of
Baldagar Manor. Pierstar and his Maces would do the rest.

The ballista crews hiding in the adjacent buildings

closed their window shutters. The last of the war wizards arrived and took
their places, and still the dragon did not move. Ruha's heart sank, and she
reluctantly turned to face Pierstar.

"I fear Prince Tang has not changed. Perhaps I..."

A dreadful sputter broke over the parapets, and Ruha let her sentence trail off.
She looked toward the lake and saw huge geysers of steam rising from its heart.
Just beneath the roiling green surface, the amber globe of her sun spell was
rapidly growing larger, with the murky figure of Cypress's body rising beneath
it like a swelling black cloud.

"Prepare yourselves!" yelled Pierstar.
An anxious clatter rattled across the roof as the Maces and their war wizards
steeled themselves for battle.

Cypress erupted from the lake with the roar of a volcano, flinging a spray of
boiling water and hissing steam in all directions. Though the golden fire had
burned the scaly hide completely off his wings, that did not prevent them from
lifting him into the air as the charred bones curled and undulated like so many
clattering fingers. It was impossible to see through the blazing globe at the
end of his neck, but the rest of his body, aside from a broad scattering of
melted scales and the scorched stumps at the ends of his arms, looked remarkably
intact.

Ruha set her stone on the parapet, then tucked two of
Hsieh's lasal leaves into the sleeve other aba, where she would be able to reach
them quickly.

A chain of cracks and loud bangs echoed over the water, the arms of the war
engines slamming against their stops. Most of the missiles and nets splashed
harmlessly into the water, but three harpoons lodged deep in
Cypress's flanks, and one net tangled in the spindly bones of his wings. The men
who had hit quickly looped their lines around stakes driven deep into the
ground, while those who had missed rewound their skeins.

Cypress roared. He whipped his fire-shrouded head

around his body, and the instant the golden flames touched the harpoon lines
and the net, they flashed and dissolved. The dragon's wings siffled through the
air, and he began to rise again.

"Shut your eyes, Maces!" Pierstar ordered. "Now,

Ruha!"

The witch uttered her counterspell. At the end of
Cypress's neck, the fiery globe burst apart with a white flash so brilliant she
saw it even through her eyelids.
Summoning her stone spell to mind, she grabbed her rock and looked toward the
dragon.

Cypress hung over the lake almost motionless, the tips of his skeletal wings
fluttering as though that tiny motion were enough to hold his hulking mass

aloft. At the end of his neck hung a smoking lump of melted bone that vaguely resembled a head. Glowing masses of cinder filled his empty eye sockets, and his long snout had fused into a stubby, tangled mass of fangs and jaw. Only his ebony horns had emerged from the conflagration unscathed, and even they made the air shimmer with heat.

Ruha hissed her spell and hurled the stone. The rock disappeared with a thunderous crack. It reappeared in the same instant, shattering Cypress's temple. The dragon's wing tips stopped waving. His gruesome chin dropped as he watched the splinters of scorched bone flutter into the water below. He brought his head up and looked toward Baldagar Manor.

You!

Ruha barely managed to stuff the lasal leaves into her mouth before a fiery yellow sun burst inside her head.
She heard Pierstar and his men cry out in astonishment, then felt herself sailing backward across the roof.

Chew the leaves, she told herself.

Even as the words reverberated through her skull, she slammed down and went tumbling across the roof. If the fall caused her any injury, the witch did not know it; she could feel only the anguish inside her mind, a

fiery agony

such as she had never felt. Swimming in boiling tar would have hurt less, or
falling naked upon At'ar's blazing face. She glimpsed Cypress's murky figure
swooping down toward Baldagar Manor; then she rolled one more time and came to
rest on her face.

A lasal haze filled Ruha's head, but the dragon's fury was so great that the fog
merely diffused the fire and did not drive it from her mind. The golden blaze
became a choking yellow mist, not nearly as hot, but as thick as syrup. She
heard screaming and realized it was her own voice.

That is but a portion of my pain. The building shook beneath Cypress's weight,
and the voices of screaming
Maces joined with that of the witch. Soon, you shall bear it all.

"Not all." Ruha found the strength to raise her head and saw the dragon standing
in the middle of the roof, a cloud of dark acid billowing around his mangled
snout.
"You cannot make Yanseldara love you, and that pain I
will never bear!"

Then I will make you bear another kind of agony.

Cypress's tail thrashed in anger, smashing through the parapets and sweeping

half a dozen men over the side.
He stooped over, reaching out as though he had forgotten't he had only stubs
where once he had claws; then a window shutter slammed open.

Ruha's world detonated: the sky went silver with lightning, meteor showers and
ice storms chased each other down from the heavens, tongues of flame crackled
through the air, crimson bolts and sapphire rays raced from every direction. The
dragon's stump disintegrated before her eyes; a deep, rumbling growl
reverberated through her bones, and the roof of Baldagar Manor began to come
apart. She leapt up to run for the parapets and felt the floor vanishing beneath
her feet.

The witch landed amidst a shower of snapped planks and beams, her body erupting
into pain despite the cushioning of the soft furniture favored by Elversult

merchants. She lay a long time without moving, halfexpecting Cypress's
scorched skull to appear above her at any moment. Instead, the yellow glow and
fiery pain faded from her mind and, much to her surprise, so did the lasal
haze—no doubt burned off by the ferocity of the dragon's attack. At length, the
terrible aching in her body also faded, and she began to realize that, other

than the dull throbbing of a few new bruises, she had survived the fall uninjured.

Ruha clambered out of the debris and found herself standing amidst the ruins of the mansion's top story, where the family's servants and young children had once kept their chambers. She picked her way toward the front of the building, too dazed to think about what she was doing, and discovered that this floor of Baldagar Manor now held nothing but the shattered remnants of the inhabitants' belongings, two dozen groaning Maces, and the smoking, mangled corpse of a ten-foot river monitor.

As the witch's ears stopped ringing, she grew aware of a loud, chugging roar coming from the direction of the water. She rushed forward, then climbed over a collapsed wall onto what had once been a private balcony overlooking Hillshadow Lake. In the center of the lake, a murky green waterspout was stretching skyward, as though trying to grasp a small whirlwind with flashing ribbons of silver and black luminescence.

Ruha heard someone clattering over the collapsed wall behind her. She turned to see Pierstar Hallowhand's battered form limping toward her, his eyes fixed on the waterspout in the center of the lake.

"What's that?" he croaked.

"That?" The witch whispered an incantation and raised her hand, then started to
spin her finger in the direction opposite the whirlwind. The vortex began to
lose speed, and the two ribbons came apart. The silver light circled the
shoreline once, then streaked away toward the Jailgates and vanished from sight.
The black

one was caught by the waterspout and dragged into
Hillshadow Lake, where it darkened the water only briefly before sinking into
the muddy bottom. "That was nothing—a fool for love, I fear."

Epilogue

Even the Shou did not have a table with enough sides for all those at the
Great Banquet of Apology, so the servants had set the platters of candied duck
and ginger hart upon a round table and arranged seven chairs around it in evenly
spaced intervals.
Prince Tang himself welcomed each guest at the door, and when Yanseldara entered
the room, he produced a long oaken staff with three gnarled fingers gripping the
finest ruby from his personal treasury. He held it before him and bowed very
low.

"I find this in dragon's lair, Lady Yanseldara," he said.
"I am sorry that I must smash original topaz."

Yanseldara accepted the staff with a sincere smile.
"The topaz was ruined by Cypress's touch, and I thank you for crushing it. I
accept this magnificent ruby as a token of the new friendship between the Ginger
Palace and Elversult. I shall treasure it always."

Vaerana rolled her eyes, then leaned close to Ruha and, in a voice much too
loud, whispered, "I'll treasure it more if they really stop selling poison!"

The servants gasped, and Lady Feng shot an indignant scowl in the Lady
Constable's direction. Hsieh quickly stepped forward and smoothed matters over
by personally taking Vaerana's arm.

"If we are all here, perhaps we sit down." The proces-

sion filed somewhat uncomfortably to the table, where the mandarin scowled and
turned to Prince Tang. "I see seven chairs, but only six guests."

The prince pointed to a chair with no goblet or flatware. "This is for Lady
Ruha's friend. Captain Fowler. It is most unfortunate he

cannot join us."'

The explanation only drew a deeper scowl from Hsieh.
"It is not for Princess Wei Dao?"

Tang's jaw fell. "She dishonors Ginger Palace! I do not set place in her
memory!"

Hsieh's uncovered eye narrowed in what Ruha now recognized as a well-practiced
expression of displeasure.
"Wei Dao is Shou princess. Trouble she cause in Elversuit is of no consequence
to Emperor, so it is appropriate to treat her as well as you treat guests."

Before the stupefied prince could respond, the mandarin spun to face Lady
Feng, who was holding Winter
Blossom on her shoulder and casting covetous glances at the golden serving
platters. According to rumor, she had developed a distressing habit of sneaking
off to Cypress's swamp with the Ginger Palace's finest tableware.

"I must offer condolences, Lady Feng," Hsieh said.
"Most High Emperor sends me to invite you to Tai Tung, but your son's bad
manners do not make that possible."

Prince Tang looked first insulted, then relieved. He forced a grave expression
and bowed to the mandarin.
"Please to pardon, but I never honor Wei Dao at my table."

"Then you never return to Shou Lung."

Tang could not keep from smiling. He turned to Ruha and asked, "Perhaps you sit
next to me? I never return to
Emperor's court, so perhaps you consider becoming my
Princess?"

"I—uh—Brave Prince, I don't know what to say," Ruha stammered. Since his return
from the dragon's lair, Tang had shown himself to be a gracious and gallant man,
but the witch was not in love with him. "I will be pleased to sit with you, but
perhaps we should discuss the rest at

another time."

Hsieh frowned, almost angrily, and stepped toward the witch. "Surely you accept.
It is great honor to be Shou princess!"

Ruha's heart sank. Normally, the Harpers would not dictate the person she
married, but these were hardly normal circumstances; Storm Silverhand would look
very unfavorably on starting trouble with the Shou. The witch glanced around the
room and saw Vaerana watching her icarefully, as though she expected Ruha to
start a war at any moment.

It was Yanseldara who broke the silence. "Before Ruha decides, perhaps you
should give her that message, Vaerana."

The Lady Constable rolled her eyes, then turned to Ruha. "I almost forgot, Witch," she said, a roguish grin upon her lips. "Storm sent for you this morning. Some giants up in Oak Dale stole a duke's daughter, and she doesn't think anyone else can bring the girl back alive."

Ruha did not know whether to hit Vaerana or hug her. "When did you plan to tell me? After my wedding?"

"I don't think Storm can wait that long." Vaerana chuckled, then took something from her pocket and pressed it into the witch's hand. It was the Harper pin Ruha had given to Captain Fowler. "I suppose you'll be needing this."

"I suppose I will." Ruha pinned the signet inside her aba, then turned to Tang, who looked almost as amused as he did disappointed. "I'm sorry, Brave Prince, but I cannot stay. You know I am a Harper, and Harpers go where they are needed."